



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER
at West Point

Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?



Harmony Program

Report Documentation Page

*Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 03 MAY 2012	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, NY, 10996			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified		
18. NUMBER OF PAGES 64	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON			

Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?

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**HARMONY PROGRAM
THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT**

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3 May 2012

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, Department of Defense or U.S. government.

Foreword

The death of Usama bin Ladin one year ago understandably generated a significant amount of interest in the professionals who carried out the raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on the night of May 2nd. Lost in the focus on this single mission is the fact that United States Special Operations Forces (SOF) have conducted thousands of comparable missions in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001. The success of "Neptune Spear" was the cumulative result of the experience, relentless focus and professionalism of a community that has been conducting these types of missions for over ten years.

A second feature of the raid and one much less apparent to the general public is that the professionals conducting this operation were trained to survey the site and collect any electronic media, papers, or pocket litter that might inform future operations. As discussed in the report, this process, known as F3EA (Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit and Analyze), has helped to revolutionize the fight against al-Qa'ida and created a cyclical operational process for combating networked actors. The end of the raid in Abbottabad was the beginning of a massive analytical effort as experts from across the Intelligence Community (IC) worked to exploit these captured documents, which in turn undoubtedly contributed to additional operations.

The Combating Terrorism Center, housed within the Department of Social Sciences at West Point, has long recognized that captured battlefield documents have enormous value to students of terrorism. Since 2005 the longstanding partnership between the CTC and our colleagues who manage the Harmony database has facilitated the release of hundreds of documents to the public, with the intention of advancing the study of terrorism and political violence. In its own small way, this report and the release of some documents from the Abbottabad compound to the public are simply a continuation of this partnership.

The CTC is proud to continue in this role by publishing these documents, and as with previous releases two cautions are worth highlighting. First and most importantly is that these documents likely represent only a fraction of the materials reportedly taken from the compound. If declassification of subsequent documents from Abbottabad or new caches of materials from other locations is forthcoming, this would inevitably necessitate additional analysis and reflection. Thus, the report that accompanies the documents must be understood as an effort to help reassess what we know about the group, but not as a definitive commentary on al-Qa'ida's evolution or the group's current status, and we should be extremely cautious of the notion that al-Qa'ida has

been defeated. Rather, the problems presented by jihadism and violent extremism more broadly will continue to shift and mutate.

Second, as with all Harmony projects, analysis based on captured documents alone is fraught with risk. While they may offer unique insights, these are most valuable when contextualized with information drawn from other sources. It is our sincere hope that the initial commentary and the release of these documents will not be the last word on the subject but simply the opening foray into a much larger academic debate and discussion which will further our understanding of al-Qa'ida and terrorism more broadly.

The decision to release these documents to the CTC is an affirmation of the values of West Point and the Center's mission. It is my expectation that as long as the Center continues to focus on its core competencies — embracing the unique responsibility to prepare cadets to think critically about the challenges they will face during war and peace; producing academically rigorous and theoretically sound research; and leveraging its deep expertise to further the public's understanding of terrorism — it will continue as an enduring national resource for the study of terrorism.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John P. Abizaid".

General (R) John P. Abizaid
Distinguished Chair, Combating Terrorism Center

Acknowledgements

While this report was authored by a small team of researchers at the CTC, we are conscious of the enormous debt of gratitude we owe to the "army" of supporters and institutions that helped make this project possible. We are indebted to Dr. Thomas Hegghammer who provided a masterful review and detailed critique of the draft in light of the documents. We are also grateful to colleagues and friends who provided internal reviews of the report: Lieutenant Colonel Jon Brickey, Brian Dodwell, Colonel Cindy Jebb, Colonel Mike Meese, Dr. Arie Perlinger, Dr. Roland Rich, Major Todd Schultz and Rachel Yon. We are particularly thankful to Erich Marquardt who was peerless in his meticulous editing and proofing of the report.

Though self-evident, it is important to acknowledge that this project would not have been possible without the support of some larger institutional friends of the CTC. We are thankful to the office of the Director of National Intelligence for entrusting us with the analysis and release of these documents to the public for the first time. Thanks also to U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM); to our colleagues who manage the HARMONY project; and to our friends at the Norwegian Defense Research Institute (FFI) for their support of the CTC and contributions to the study of terrorism.

Executive Summary

This report is a study of 17 declassified documents captured during the Abbottabad raid and released to the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC). They consist of electronic letters or draft letters, totaling 175 pages in the original Arabic and 197 pages in the English translation. The earliest is dated September 2006 and the latest April 2011. Some of the letters are incomplete and/or are missing their dates, and not all of the letters explicitly attribute their author(s) and/or indicate the addressee. In addition to Bin Ladin, the recognizable individuals who appear in the letters either as authors or as recipients are 'Atiyyatullah and Abu Yahya al-Libi, both of whom are al-Qa'ida leaders; Adam Yahya Gadahn, the American al-Qa'ida spokesman and media advisor; Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, the leader of the Somali militant group Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin; Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi), the leader of the Yemen-based al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); and Hakimullah Mahsud, the leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Given the small collection of documents released to the CTC, it is impossible to construct a coherent evolution of al-Qa'ida or its current state. "Letters from Abbottabad" is an initial exploration and contextualization of 17 documents that will be the grist for future academic debate and discussion.

In contrast to Bin Ladin's public statements that focused on the injustice of those he believed to be the "enemies" (*a`da'*) of Muslims, namely corrupt "apostate" Muslim rulers and their Western "overseers," the focus of his private letters is Muslims' suffering at the hands of his jihadi "brothers" (*ikhwā*). He was at pains advising them to abort domestic attacks that cause Muslim civilian casualties and instead focus on the United States, "our desired goal." Bin Ladin's frustration with regional jihadi groups and his seeming inability to exercise control over their actions and public statements is the most compelling story to be told on the basis of the 17 declassified documents. The main points from each of the report's four sections are briefly summarized below.

Al-Qa'ida and Regional Jihadi Groups

Al-Qa'ida

- On the basis of these documents, the relationship between what has been labeled "al-Qa'ida Central" (AQC) under the leadership of Bin Ladin is not in sync on the operational level with its so-called "affiliates." Bin Ladin enjoyed little control over either groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida in name (e.g., AQAP or AQI/ISI) or so-called "fellow travelers" such as the TTP.
- The documents show that al-Qa'ida's relationship with its so-called "affiliates" is a contested one among the senior leaders, and three different positions exist

within al-Qa`ida on this subject. Some urge senior leaders to declare their distance, and even to dissociate themselves, from groups whose leaders do not consult with al-Qa`ida but act in its name. Others urge the opposite, believing that the inclusion of regional jihadi groups in the fold contributes to al-Qa`ida's growth and expansion. Bin Ladin represented a third position; he wanted to maintain communication, through his own pen or that of others in his circle, with "brothers" everywhere, to urge restraint and provide advice even if it fell on deaf ears, without granting them formal unity with al-Qa`ida.

The Affiliates

Rather than a source of strength, Bin Ladin was burdened by what he viewed as the incompetence of the "affiliates," including their lack of political acumen to win public support, their media campaigns and their poorly planned operations which resulted in the unnecessary deaths of thousands of Muslims.

- *Islamic State of Iraq/Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (ISI/AQI)*: The documents conclusively demonstrate that the failures of ISI/AQI weighed heavily on Bin Ladin, as he urged other groups not to repeat their mistakes. Adam Gadahn advised that al-Qa`ida should publicly dissociate itself from ISI/AQI.
- *Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)*: While routinely described as "the most dangerous" al-Qa`ida affiliate, as of 2010-2011 Bin Ladin seemed to have spent more time worrying about this group than appreciating its contributions. In a strongly worded letter, the leader of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, was directly warned against pursuing any expansionist plan, such as declaring an Islamic state in Yemen, and was urged to refocus his efforts on attacking the United States, not the Yemeni government or security forces.
- *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)*: The TTP seems to have come incredibly close to provoking a direct and public confrontation with al-Qa`ida's leadership. Its indiscriminate attacks against Muslims caused `Atiyyatullah and Abu Yahya al-Libi to write to TTP leader Hakimullah Mahsud to express their displeasure with the group's "ideology, methods and behavior." They also threatened to take public measures "unless we see from you serious and immediate practical and clear steps towards reforming [your ways] and dissociating yourself from these vile mistakes [that violate Islamic Law]."
- *Al-Shabab*: Bin Ladin appeared to have seen little practical value in formally recognizing the group's pledge of loyalty (*bay`a*). His motivations for withholding this recognition were largely pragmatic and reflected his concern over their poor governance and inflexible administration of *hudud* (deterrent penalties for certain crimes). He also wanted them to focus on "construction and

development" and feared that a formal merger with al-Qa'ida would prevent investment and foreign aid in Somalia.

- *Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Taliban and Jaysh al-Islam:* While there is mention of these groups in the documents released to the CTC, these discussions are not substantive enough to inform an understanding of the relationship between al-Qa'ida's senior leaders and these groups.

Al-Qa'ida Ties to Iran and Pakistan?

While not extensive, the discussions of Iran and Pakistan in the documents suggest that al-Qa'ida's relations with both countries were fraught with difficulties.

- References to Iran show that the relationship is not one of alliance, but of indirect and unpleasant negotiations over the release of detained jihadis and their families, including members of Bin Ladin's family. The detention of prominent al-Qa'ida members seems to have sparked a campaign of threats, taking hostages and indirect negotiations between al-Qa'ida and Iran that have been drawn out for years and may still be ongoing.
- The discussion of Pakistan is scarce and inconclusive. Although references are made about "trusted Pakistani brothers," there are no explicit references to any institutional Pakistani support for al-Qa'ida or its operatives.

Bin Ladin's Plans

One of the 17 documents is a letter dated April 2011 authored by Bin Ladin in response to the "Arab Spring," which he considered to be a "formidable event" (*hadath ha'il*) in the modern history of Muslims. This letter reflected his intended strategy of responding to the new political landscape that was emerging in the Middle East and North Africa.

- In the Arab world, Bin Ladin wanted al-Qa'ida to focus its efforts on media outreach and "guidance." He believed that a media campaign should be launched to incite "people who have not yet revolted and exhort them to rebel against the rulers" (*khuruj 'ala al-hukkam*). But he also wanted to invest in guidance, "educating and warning Muslim people from those [who might tempt them to settle for] half solutions," such as engaging in the secular political process by forming political parties.
- In Afghanistan, Bin Ladin wanted jihadis to continue their fight against the United States. He believed that their efforts weakened the United States, enabling Muslims elsewhere to revolt against their rulers, no longer fearing that the United States would be in a powerful position to support these rulers.
- It is possible that Ayman al-Zawahiri is the author of one or more of the anonymous letters (see Appendix). Based on the 17 documents, 'Atiyya was closest to Bin Ladin.

Introduction

“I plan to release a statement [announcing] that we are starting a new phase to correct [the mistakes] we made; in doing so, we shall reclaim, God willing, the trust of a large segment of those who lost their trust in the jihadis,”¹ wrote Usama bin Ladin in 2010. In contrast to his public statements that focused on the injustice of those he believed to be the “enemies” (*a’da’*) of Muslims, namely corrupt “apostate” Muslim rulers and their Western “overseers,” the focus of Bin Ladin’s private letters was Muslims’ suffering at the hands of his jihadi “brothers” (*ikhwa*). He was at pains advising them to abort domestic attacks that caused Muslim civilian casualties and, instead, focus on the United States, “our desired goal.” Bin Ladin’s frustration with regional jihadi groups and his seeming inability to exercise control over their actions and public statements is the most compelling story to be told on the basis of the 17 declassified documents captured during the Abbottabad raid in May 2011.

This report is a study of these 17 documents, but it is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the information revealed in them. It consists of four sections. The first section describes the documents’ format, the typical journey captured battlefield documents undergo before declassification, and the limitations imposed on assessing the state of al-Qa’ida today in light of these 17 documents alone. The second section argues that on the basis of these documents, the relationship between what has been dubbed “al-Qa’ida Central” (AQC) under the leadership of Bin Ladin is not in sync on the operational level with its so-called “affiliates.” The third section discusses al-Qa’ida’s relationship with Iran and Pakistan. With respect to Iran, the documents show that it is an antagonistic relationship, largely based on indirect and unpleasant negotiations over the release of detained jihadis and their families, including members of Bin Ladin’s family. Relations with the Pakistani government are not discussed; the documents do not *explicitly* point to any institutional Pakistani support for Bin Ladin. The fourth section covers miscellaneous subjects raised in the documents that point to what the future might hold for al-Qa’ida, including Bin Ladin’s response to the “Arab Spring” and how he planned to convert jihadi activities into missionary activities in the Middle East and North Africa, but not in Afghanistan, as well as the conspicuous distance of

¹ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 15. The pages of the documents received by the CTC are not all numbered in the original Arabic version. The English translation numbers the pages to correspond to the content of each page of the Arabic version. As a result, most Arabic pages take more than a single page when translated (except when the Arabic font is very large as with SOCOM-2012-0000016), so the reader will find that the page number of the Arabic version is included on a separate line in the text of the English translation. To avoid confusion, this report refers to the page number in the Arabic version so that the reader can easily find it in the English translation.

Ayman al-Zawahiri from Bin Ladin in the documents released to the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point.

I- From Abbottabad to the CTC: The 17 Declassified Documents

It was reported that “thousands of items” were captured from Usama bin Ladin’s compound during the Abbottabad raid.² To date, however, only 17 documents have been declassified and provided to the CTC, all of which are hereby released with the publication of this report.³ They consist of electronic letters or draft letters, totaling 175 pages in the original Arabic and 197 pages in the English translation. They were written over several years. The earliest is dated September 2006 and the latest April 2011, a week before Bin Ladin’s death. Some of the letters are incomplete and/or are missing their dates, and not all the letters explicitly attribute the author(s) and/or indicate the addressee. Given that they are all electronic documents presumably saved on thumb drives, memory cards or the hard drive of his computer, except for the letters addressed to Bin Ladin it cannot be ascertained that letters explicitly authored by him reached their intended destinations.

In addition to Bin Ladin,⁴ the recognizable individuals who appear in the letters either as authors or as recipients of letters are Mahmud/`Atiyya⁵ and Abu Yahya al-Libi,⁶ both

² David Ignatius, “A Lion in Winter,” *Washington Post*, 18 March 2012.

³ The quality of the English translation provided to the CTC is not adequate throughout. When the translation was deemed inadequate, quotations cited in this report have either been amended or translated anew by Nelly Lahoud. Furthermore, the conversion of the dating of the letters from the Hijri to the Gregorian calendar is inaccurate in some places. The Appendix provides corrected dates to some of the letters, along with some pointers on how some letters relate to others.

⁴ Usama bin Muhammad bin 'Awad bin Ladin was born on 10 March 1957, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He is the founder of Tandhim al-Qa`ida (al-Qa`ida Organization), which carried out the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. The literature on Bin Ladin is extensive. For an informative account of his early life, see Jonathan Randal, *Osama: The Making of a Terrorist* (New York: Vintage, 2005). On 2 May 2011, President Barack Obama announced that Usama bin Ladin was killed in his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. For details, see “Remarks by the President on Osama Bin Laden,” Office of the Press Secretary, 2 May 2011.

⁵ He is also known by the alias Abu 'Abd al-Rahman and `Atiyyatullah, and is one of the leading public faces of al-Qa`ida. His real name is Jamal Ibrahim Ishtiwi al-Misrati. He was born in 1970 in Misrata, Libya. `Atiyya pursued Islamic religious studies in Mauritania, then joined jihad in Algeria. He went to Afghanistan in the late 1990s and was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan on 22 August 2011. For details, see the biography Ayman al-Zawahiri provided in his eulogy for `Atiyya: “Risalat al-amal wa al-bishr li ahlina fi Misr,” 8th episode, <http://www.aljihad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=14008> (accessed 25 April 2012).

⁶ Hasan Qa'id/Abu Yahya al-Libi is an al-Qa`ida leader and ideologue, as well as a former member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Al-Libi is believed to have traveled to Afghanistan in the early 1990s, then to Mauritania to study Islamic religious sciences before returning to Afghanistan. He was captured a

of whom are al-Qa`ida leaders; Adam Yahya Gadahn, the American al-Qa`ida spokesman and media advisor;⁷ Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr,⁸ the leader of the Somali militant group Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin — whose 2009 pledge of allegiance to al-Qa`ida was recognized by Ayman al-Zawahiri in February 2012;⁹ Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi), the leader of the Yemen-based al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP);¹⁰ and Hakimullah Mahsud, the leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).¹¹

Before delving into an analysis of the documents, it is critical to address the academic limitations of studying declassified captured battlefield documents. Such a study is fraught with risks, not least because the academic community is not involved in the process of declassification and is therefore unaware of the larger classified corpus of documents. The academic community's access to captured battlefield documents is at the end of a journey that often starts with Special Operations Forces (SOF)¹² capturing

year after 9/11 by Pakistani authorities and handed to U.S. authorities. He was sent to Bagram prison from where he and several other high-profile captives escaped on the night of 10 July 2005. For details, see Michael Moss and Souad Mekhennet, "Rising Leader for Next Phase of Al Qaeda's War," *New York Times*, 4 April 2008.

⁷ Adam Gadahn was born on 1 September 1978, in California. Gadahn converted to Islam in 1995 and subsequently traveled to Pakistan to study. Gadahn made his first public appearance as an al-Qa`ida member in a videotape in 2004 under the kunya `Azzam al-Amriki. For details, see John M. Broder, "American Being Sought by the FBI Found his Place in Islam, Relatives Say," *New York Times*, 28 May 2004.

⁸ His name is Ahmed Abdi Godane. For details, see "Who are Somalia's Shabaab?" BBC, 23 February 2012.

⁹ Nelly Lahoud, "The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa`idat al-Jihad," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 2 (2012).

¹⁰ Nasir `Abd al-Karim al-Wuhayshi is a Yemeni citizen and the leader of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Wuhayshi served as a private secretary to Usama bin Ladin for years in Afghanistan but left in 2001 and was soon arrested by Iranian authorities. Two years later, they transferred him to Yemen where he was imprisoned without charges. In February 2006, Nasir al-Wuhayshi was one of 23 Yemeni captives who escaped from custody from a maximum security prison in Sana`a and was acknowledged as the group's leader shortly thereafter. For details, see Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, ed., "A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes, and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (2011), 35, fn 82, 36.

¹¹ Zulfiqar Mahsud was born in 1981. He was elevated to the position of *amir* (leader) of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) after its previous leader, Baitullah Mahsud, was killed in a drone strike in August 2009. See "Profile: Hakimullah Mahsud," BBC, 3 May 2010.

¹² SOF is often confused with Special Forces (SF). The term Special Forces or SF applies to only a small subset of Special Operations Forces which consist of U.S. Army Green Berets. Special Operations Forces consist of forces from all four services including (1) Special Forces (SF), Ranger, Army Special Operations aviation, Special Operations MISO, and Special Operations Civil Affairs units from the Army; (2) SEAL, SEAL delivery vehicle, and special boat teams from the Navy; (3) Special Operations flying units (includes unmanned aircraft systems), special tactics elements (includes combat control, pararescue, weather, and select tactical air control party units), and aviation FID units from the U.S. Air Force; and (4)

them. The captured data is then passed to the intelligence community for (further) exploitation before it is declassified, in part or in its entirety, and released to the public or to an academic center such as the CTC to contextualize before its public release.

What then is the path that characterizes the journey of declassified captured battlefield documents?

Underlying the mystique that Navy SEALs and other SOF hold in the public's common perception is their superior ability to conduct "direct action" (DA) raids like the one carried out in Abbottabad to capture or kill Usama bin Ladin. In reality, direct action is only one of eleven core activities or tasks conducted by SOF.¹³ Since 9/11, one of their major core activities has been counterterrorism operations, which include conducting sensitive site exploitation (SSE). An SSE is similar to gathering evidence during a domestic criminal investigation, although the period allowed for military forces to gather information is much shorter, consisting of minutes as opposed to hours, days or weeks. Much like a criminal investigation where the information is used to build a case against a suspect, the information gathered from a military target is analyzed for tactical, operational and strategic purposes. For example, the information may provide details on an impending attack, or specifics about the larger network that provides new leads or insight into the individual's or the organization's strategic plans.

The military in general and SOF in particular have always recognized the importance of capturing information about the enemy on the battlefield. Indeed, starting from the first operations in Afghanistan in October 2001, SOF built an SSE into every operation it carried out, seizing countless computers, phones, photographs, paper documents and other electronic media. When the SEALs conducted Operation Neptune Spear on 2 May 2011,¹⁴ capturing or killing Bin Ladin was only one of their objectives; another main objective was the SSE of the compound to gather everything that could be exploited from an intelligence perspective.

The SSE often yields unique and valuable information. Sometimes the information can be exploited immediately, but often it will take additional time and capabilities in order

Marine Special Operations battalions. See Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations, 18 April 2011, II-1, II-2.

¹³ SOF Core Activities or Tasks include the following: direct action (DA), special reconnaissance (SR), counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (CP of WMD), counterterrorism (CT), unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense (FID), security force assistance (SFA), counterinsurgency (COIN), information operations (IO), military information support operations (MISO), civil affairs operations (CAO). See Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations, May 5, 2011, II-5, II-19.

¹⁴ It should be noted that the Abbottabad raid fell on May 1 in the United States and May 2 in Pakistan.

for it to be properly exploited. The collected data is then shared with the broader intelligence community for further analysis. Typically, the government agency that acquires the data effectively “owns” it and determines its classification, as well as controls its distribution and declassification. The standard procedure is to classify the data in the immediate phase following the SOF operation. From the intelligence community’s perspective, many reasons justify immediate classification, including the possibility that its public release could cause other elements of the terrorist network to move or go into hiding, making it harder to locate and capture them. In the case of the Abbottabad raid, it is possible that declassification of additional documents or items is forthcoming. It is also possible that the remaining items are of no value to the public (e.g., books, movies, or grocery lists), and the intelligence agency that owns them made the decision that declassifying such items did not warrant the cost involved, or the time and energy of its staff.

It is only after the intelligence community has exhausted the data for tactical and strategic purposes that it is declassified. Therefore, when an academic center, such as the CTC, is provided declassified documents to study and analyze before releasing them to the public, its researchers have no part in the selection of documents to be declassified and are privy only to declassified documents. Like with any research project, a researcher does not always have at their disposal all the materials to study a given topic and must therefore extrapolate that which is *unknown* from that which is *known*. In some cases, such extrapolations may lead to firm conclusions. In other cases, however, conclusions reached on the basis of extrapolations — even when these are based on well-founded research — may need revision when previously unavailable materials are declassified. When scholars pursue a research topic that involves materials subject to classification by the government, they face what one may term the “(de)classification challenge.” They have no choice but to wait for materials to be declassified, however frustrating the waiting period may be. The process of declassifying materials could occur all at once or in different stages; if it is the latter, it is even harder to reach firm or even plausible conclusions.

Whereas in the eyes of the SOF community the Abbottabad raid was successfully completed, the academic community studying al-Qa`ida has much work ahead before an authoritative study of al-Qa`ida can be expected. If the mission of the SEALs met all of its objectives — find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze (F3EA)¹⁵ — the academic community is still in the *find* stage of the necessary documents to accomplish its task.

¹⁵ Michael T. Flynn, Rich Juergens and Thomas L. Cantrell, “Employing ISR: SOF Best Practices,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 50 (2008), 56-61. F3EA describes the processes of *finding* a particular individual; *fixing*

From an academic perspective, in view of the thin volume of the documents and their spread over a period of six years, there is little hope of writing a coherent study of the *evolution* of al-Qa`ida since 2006 based exclusively on these letters. As it stands, analyzing the state of al-Qa`ida on the basis of the documents is like commenting on the tailoring of a jacket when only a sleeve is available. Although a sleeve cannot substitute for the remaining parts of the jacket, it can still offer important features about the overall jacket: it can indicate its color, its textile design, and most likely the quality of its stitches and lining.

II- Al-Qa`ida and Regional Jihadi Groups

To appreciate the new insights gained from the documents, it is helpful to place them in the context of what is previously known about al-Qa`ida as an organization through the lens of publicly available documents meant to be internal to the organization.¹⁶ The founders of al-Qa`ida envisaged their organization as an international entity, serving as a “wellspring for expertise in military training and [the art of] fighting.”¹⁷ Al-Qa`ida’s “by-laws” are explicit that this “wellspring of expertise” would also serve to enable other jihadi groups around the world, stating that “our relationship with sincere jihadi groups and movements is premised on cooperation [to advance] righteousness and piety.”¹⁸ In this collaborative spirit, when al-Qa`ida was operating in the open in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, it made its guesthouses (*madafat*) and its training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan available to anyone who sought military training (*i`dad*) before engaging in fighting (*jihad*) either in Afghanistan or other locations. This, however, did not mean that those who received training in al-Qa`ida’s camps

the precise location of the enemy target; *finishing* the target by either capturing or killing it; *exploiting* data or information on target or at a later date; and finally *analyze* the data, in combination with existing intelligence to identify new lines of operation and new starting points to continue the cycle.

¹⁶ Following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, materials were captured on the battlefield and have since been stored in the Department of Defense’s Harmony database. While they are illuminating, analyzing them is fraught with certain risks since it is difficult to assess how representative they are of the larger corpus of materials that exist.

¹⁷ AFGP-2002-000078, page one of the Arabic document, but the document starts on page nine.

¹⁸ AFGP-2002-600048, 4-5. Translation amended. It is worth noting that the by-laws state different types of relationships that al-Qa`ida can or cannot have: “our relationship with Islamic non-jihadi groups is premised upon love, friendship and advice; we acknowledge their good deeds but, if need be, make evident to them what we believe to be their shortcomings.” Also see: “our position with respect to the idols, secular and national parties and their ilk is to dissociate from them and to declare our ongoing enmity against their unbelief until they believe in nothing but God. We shall not [compromise] with them on the basis of half-solutions, or [agree] to a dialogue with them or even flatter them [to further our agenda].”

automatically became members of the group;¹⁹ by the same token, when al-Qa`ida assisted other jihadi groups it did not make its collaboration conditional on the group joining al-Qa`ida. In practical terms, the collaboration meant that al-Qa`ida and another jihadi group could come to a mutual agreement to carry out a joint operation or another militant activity together, yet the same jihadi group maintained its own autonomy, including its ideology (*fikr*) and activities.²⁰ The relationship between Indonesia's Jema`a Islamiyya (JI) and al-Qa`ida typifies this dynamic. In the words of a JI member who personally liaised with al-Qa`ida, the dynamic is like that of "a business affiliate, we can ask them (i.e., al-Qa`ida) for an opinion but they have no authority over us. We are free. We have our own funds, our own men. We are independent, like Australia and the U.S. But when it comes to an operation we can join together."²¹

Despite its collaboration with various jihadi groups around the world, al-Qa`ida did not seek to formalize these relationships into a unified command under its umbrella. Indeed, members of al-Qa`ida see themselves as part of a distinct entity that is separate from and even superior to other jihadi groups.²² It was only when al-Qa`ida lost its sanctuary following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 that a trend of regional jihadi groups pledging allegiance to al-Qa`ida or acting in its name emerged. Paradoxically, this may have been due to the fame that the 9/11 attacks generated in the jihadi world and at the same time al-Qa`ida's inability to be in control of its organization after it lost its sanctuary. More precisely, it was in 2003 that the branding al-Qa`ida took off when Saudi militants adopted the name "al-Qa`ida on the Arabian Peninsula" (QAP).²³ In 2004, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi's Jama`at al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad group pledged allegiance to al-Qa`ida, and Usama bin Ladin publicly acknowledged the group as "al-Qa`ida in Mesopotamia," or al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI). Al-Zarqawi's group was the only regional group that Bin Ladin formally admitted into al-Qa`ida; others were later announced publicly by Ayman al-Zawahiri.²⁴

¹⁹ Fadil Harun, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam: Qissat Fadil Harun* 1, 71. On the dynamics of collaboration but not union between al-Qa`ida and other jihadi groups, see Lahoud's forthcoming report that examines Harun's autobiography.

²⁰ Fadil Harun, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam* 2, 426.

²¹ Quinton Temby, "Informal Networks – Unraveling Al-Qaeda's Southeast Asia Alliances" IHS Defense, Security and Risk Consulting, March 2012. Nelly Lahoud is grateful to Quinton Temby for making his research available to her prior to its publication.

²² Fadil Harun, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam* 1, 9.

²³ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 37.

²⁴ In 2012, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced al-Qa`ida's merger with al-Shabab. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Bushra Sarra" (Glad Tidings), <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=55735> (accessed 26 April 2012). In November 2007, al-Zawahiri and Abu al-Layth al-Libi announced al-Qa`ida's merger with the Libyan

The proliferation of regional jihadi groups affiliating themselves with al-Qa`ida and the continued existence of core al-Qa`ida leaders believed to be based in Pakistan and/or Afghanistan led to the perception that al-Qa`ida was expanding. It was assumed that al-Qa`ida was able to rebuild across Pakistan's northwest frontier following the losses it suffered in the immediate aftermath of the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001. Rejuvenated, al-Qa`ida is believed to have been able to "act as an organization,"²⁵ and the intelligence community labeled this revived entity "al-Qa`ida Central" (AQC) – both in reference to the geographical presence of the core senior leaders who were said to report to Bin Ladin to seek his approval for major decisions,²⁶ and also to indicate that there is at least a symbiotic relationship between "AQC" and regional jihadi groups, dubbed as AQC's "affiliates." According to this argument, AQC "gives strategic guidance to its regional affiliates" and it is assumed that the affiliates act largely in compliance with AQC's directives.²⁷

The Construction of an "Al-Qa`ida Central"

The documents reveal a different story about the relationship between AQC and the affiliates, and about Bin Ladin's role in global jihadi activities. The documents show that this relationship is a contested one among senior leaders, and three different positions exist within al-Qa`ida on this subject. Adam Gadahn's letter to an unknown "shaykh" represented those who want to remain faithful to the principles for which they believe al-Qa`ida stands, and urged senior leaders to declare their distance or dissociate themselves from groups whose leaders do not consult with al-Qa`ida yet have the chutzpa to act in its name. Others, represented by an anonymous letter, urge the opposite, believing that the inclusion of regional jihadi groups in the fold contributes to al-Qa`ida's growth and expansion. Bin Ladin represented a third position, as he wanted to maintain communication, through his own pen or that of his inner circle, with

Islamic Fighting Group. See "Wahdat al-Saff," <http://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=185737> (accessed 26 April 2012). In May 2006, al-Zawahiri and Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah announced al-Qa`ida's merger with the Egyptian Islamic Group, "Communiqué from Those Adhering to the Covenant in the Egyptian Islamic Group," <http://al-qimma.net/showthread.php?t=6224&langid=2> (accessed 26 April 2012). In September 2006, al-Zawahiri announced al-Qa`ida's merger with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). See "Qadaya Sakhinah ma' al-Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri," <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=efaperre> (accessed 26 April 2012).

²⁵ Craig Whitlock, 'The New al-Qaeda Central,' *Washington Post*, 9 September 2007. Whitlock based his argument on interviews he had with senior U.S. intelligence officials.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Eric Schmitt, "Jet Plot Shows Growing Ability of Qaeda Affiliates," *New York Times*, 31 December 2009. Schmitt based his article on interviews with U.S. counterterrorism officials.

“brothers” everywhere, to urge restraint and provide advice, without granting them formal unity with al-Qa`ida.

The documents show that some of the affiliates sought Bin Ladin’s blessing on symbolic matters, such as declaring an Islamic state, and wanted a formal union to acquire the al-Qa`ida brand. On the operational front, however, the affiliates either did not consult with Bin Ladin or were not prepared to follow his directives. Therefore, the framing of an “AQC” as an organization in control of regional “affiliates” reflects a conceptual construction by outsiders rather than the messy reality of insiders. Judging by the letters, a relationship, at least via correspondence, clearly existed between Bin Ladin and regional jihadi leaders. But it is in the second half of 2010,²⁸ in a long and detailed letter addressed to `Atiyya, that Bin Ladin, alarmed by the “increased mistakes” committed by the “brothers” who are spread over “many regions,”²⁹ sought to bring regional jihadi groups in line with al-Qa`ida’s vision and code of conduct. The reader should note that when Bin Ladin used terms such as “brothers” (*al-ikhwa*) or “we,” he was not always referring to members of al-Qa`ida. Except for the “apostates” (*murtaddun*), by which he meant Muslims who act as the West’s agents (*wukala*) against the interests of the *umma* (global community of Muslims),³⁰ all Muslims were considered to be “we” in his eyes.³¹ In the same spirit of unity, all jihadis were “brothers” in Bin Ladin’s parlance — including those whose actions he chastised (e.g., TTP, AQAP),³² and those whose request for formal unity with al-Qa`ida he denied (e.g., al-Shabab).³³

²⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000019. The content of the letter makes it evident that it is authored by Bin Ladin. The letter, however, is not dated, but the author referred to a statement released by Sa`id al-Shihri concerning the arrest of Hayla al-Qasir in Saudi Arabia, who was accused of collecting money for the jihadis. The author also referred to the following report by the satellite channel al-`Arabiyya, which is dated 4 July 2010: “‘Nisa’ al-Qa`ida,” *al-`Arabiyya*, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/06/04/110439.html> (accessed 26 April 2012). Therefore, the letter must have been composed after 4 July 2010 but before 21 October 2010 because parts of SOCOM-2012-0000015 (which is dated 21 October 2010) follow up on issues raised in SOCOM-2012-0000019.

²⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 3.

³⁰ See SOCOM-2012-0000016, 16, for an explanation of the connotation associated with the term “agents.”

³¹ In Islam, the spirit of unity among Muslims is an important tenet of the faith. That is why it is common for Muslims to highlight that believers are brothers in religion (cf. Q. 49:10). Thus, Bin Ladin’s use of “brothers” is in reference to being brothers in religion, but not necessarily “brothers”/members in the same organization.

³² See section below on the “Affiliates.”

³³ SOCOM-2012-0000005, and discussion of al-Shabab below.

In 2010, Bin Ladin asked 'Atiyya to prepare a memorandum of understanding (*mudhakkira*) that would require regional jihadi groups to consult with AQC before they act.³⁴ It is ironic that Bin Ladin deemed it fitting to appropriate the expression “AQC” from the media to clarify the plan he sought to implement. “This expression [AQC],” he wrote to 'Atiyya, “is a technical term (*istilah*) used in the media to distinguish between al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan and al-Qa'ida in the rest of the regions (*aqalim*). I do not object to using it initially to clarify the objective [of the centralization endeavor].”³⁵

Far from being in control of the operational side of regional jihadi groups, the tone in several letters authored by Bin Ladin makes it clear that he was struggling to exercise even a minimal influence over them. It is further evident that although he did not consider publicly dissociating (*tabarru' min*) himself and al-Qa'ida from the actions of regional groups, as Adam Gadahn strongly urged the senior leadership to do,³⁶ Bin Ladin largely disapproved of their conduct. High on his list of concerns was their flexible understanding of *tatarrus*, which resulted in the unnecessary deaths of Muslim civilians.³⁷ *Tatarrus* refers to special circumstances when it is permissible, from an Islamic law of war perspective, for a military commander to attack enemy territory, even if the attack may result in the deaths of non-combatants, including Muslim women and children.³⁸ In modern political parlance, it is comparable to civilians dying in war as collateral damage. Bin Ladin was concerned that regional jihadi groups had expanded the meaning of a classical legal concept meant to be applied in rare circumstances and turned it from an exception into the norm. As a result, the jihadis, he worried, have lost considerable sympathy from the Muslim public; this loss was compounded when “the mistakes of the jihadis were exploited by the enemy, [further] distorting the image of the jihadis in the eyes of the *umma*'s general public and separating them from their popular bases.”³⁹

³⁴ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 9.

³⁵ Ibid., 17. Linguistically, the Arabic expression Bin Ladin uses for AQC is rather sloppy. He uses “al-Qa'ida fi al-markaz.” A more appropriate designation would be ‘Tanzim al-Qa'ida al-Markazi,’ or “Qiyadat al-Qa'ida al-Markaziyya.”

³⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000004.

³⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 4.

³⁸ See, for example, the discussion in Shaybani's *Siyar* in Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani's Siyar* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 101-102. The term *tatarrus* is not used in this classical text, but the context of the legal discussion is the same.

³⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 4.

In practical terms, Bin Ladin wanted the memorandum to include broad guidelines concerning both the global military activities of the jihadis and their media releases. The two, he believed, should go hand in hand, so that “we do not violate our words with some of our practices.”⁴⁰ The memorandum should then be sent to the regional leaders,⁴¹ requesting their responses,⁴² and ultimately demanding their “formal commitment” (*iltizam*).⁴³ As for the military activities, the memorandum should stipulate that every regional *amir* (leader) should take all necessary measures to maintain control and discipline over the military activities of his group and avoid a flexible approach to the question of *tatarrus*.⁴⁴ In the event that mistakes involuntarily occur and non-combatants die as a result, apologies and explanations should follow, even if those fallen are sinners (*fussaq*). Should the regional leaders fail to apologize, “it would be necessary for us [presumably AQC] to take responsibility [for their errors] and apologize for what happened.”⁴⁵

As for media releases, Bin Ladin wanted the memorandum to include a commitment to centralize all jihadi media releases. The importance of having a sophisticated and coherent media strategy was critical for Bin Ladin, believing it to be “a principal element of the battle.”⁴⁶ In a different letter, he (and possibly ‘Atiyya) stressed that winning “the media occupies the greater portion of the battle today,” wittily adding that “the satellite channels today are worse than the satiric poets (*shu`ara` al-hija`*) of the pre-Islamic era.”⁴⁷ The poetic genre of *hija`* to which he is referring had a powerful

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., 9.

⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000015, 5.

⁴⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000016, 18. This letter may not have been authored by Bin Ladin. It may be helpful to understand it in the context of the following: SOCOM-2012-0000015, authored by Bin Ladin, noted on page 5 that he is enclosing a file consisting of parts of a letter that he would like ‘Atiyya to edit for the purpose of sending to Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi), the leader of AQAP. He indicated that ‘Atiyya is better placed than him to draft it because he knows the “brothers” there in Yemen. He also asked him to share with him the final format of the letter. SOCOM-2012-0000017 consists of many paragraphs and notes that do not form an internally coherent essay/letter. Some of these are identical to paragraphs included in Letter 13. It is therefore possible that SOCOM-2012-0000017 was the draft that Bin Ladin enclosed to ‘Atiyya; in turn, ‘Atiyya used parts of SOCOM-2012-0000017 and transformed them into a coherent letter to Abu Basir, and this coherent letter is SOCOM-2012-0000016 – which is not signed – to share with Bin Ladin before sending. It is not clear whether Bin Ladin wanted ‘Atiyya to sign it in his or Bin Ladin’s name. The line on “hija” is not included in SOCOM-2012-0000017; if it is ‘Atiyya who edited it, then this would be his colorful language, not Bin Ladin’s.

resonance in that distant era, and Arabs today understand too well the connotations it imparts. In the words of Pellat, the purpose of *hija'* "was to stigmatize the failings that were the antithesis of the qualities glorified."⁴⁸

Bin Ladin explained to 'Atiyya that "we are in need of sincere internal advice and a constructive critical evaluation of all our politics and [media] releases be they from AQI or from regional groups." He advised that two "competent brothers," internal to the organization, should devote all their energy to this task and also seek help externally to find a trusted and learned person to assist in "correcting and developing" our politics.⁴⁹ Bin Ladin was not alone in being concerned about the mediocre state of jihadi media. Adam Gadahn was highly critical of the inadequate level, even vulgarity, he found to be characteristic of jihadi media. In a letter composed in early 2011 and forwarded to Bin Ladin,⁵⁰ Gadahn wrote about jihadi forums with utter disdain, believing them to be "repulsive to most Muslims" and a liability to al-Qa'ida. He argued that most of their participants are characterized by religious fanaticism and biases, and therefore "distort to some extent the image of al-Qa'ida."⁵¹

Beyond centralizing jihadi releases, Bin Ladin was keen to create a credible jihadi media so that it becomes a reference point for mainstream Muslims interested in learning about jihad and jihadis. It bothered him that he watched a television program on al-Jazeera, *al-Islamiyyun*, which ran an episode littered with factual errors about him.⁵² Although Bin Ladin did not generally come across as egotistical, in this instance it is clear that he worried about his legacy. "He who does not make known his own history

⁴⁸ Ch. Pellat, "Hidja'," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, second edition. There is also a poetic genre for the purpose of glorification, the genre of "*madh*."

⁴⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 15.

⁵⁰ SOCOM-2012-0000004. This letter does not explicitly indicate who the author is or to whom it is addressed. Since the author remarked that the American television channel ABC broadcast a part of a statement he gave on the fourth anniversary of 9/11, this suggests that it was authored by Adam Gadahn who did indeed release a statement then, part of which was broadcast on ABC. The content suggests that it was not addressed to Bin Ladin since Gadahn refers to him in the third person. It is also not dated, but it must have been authored either in January 2011 or soon thereafter, since the author referred to the resignation of Keith Olbermann from MSNBC on 21 January 2011. The letter is in essence responding to many of the requests/queries that Bin Ladin made in SOCOM-2012-0000015, particularly those concerning a media strategy for the ten year anniversary of 9/11. It is likely that 'Atiyya shared SOCOM-2012-0000015 with Gadahn, and SOCOM-2012-0000004 basically addressed the questions in SOCOM-2012-0000015.

⁵¹ SOCOM-2012-0000004, 4.

⁵² Bin Ladin is referring to a program on *al-Jazeera*. The specific episode to which he is referring is entitled "Man huwa Bin Ladin" (Who is Bin Ladin). It may be viewed at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Yd2NPKuJJA> (accessed 30 April 2012).

[to the world]," he wrote to 'Atiyya, "[runs the risk that] some in the media and among historians will construct a history for him, using whatever information they have, regardless of whether their information is accurate or not."⁵³

Bin Ladin clearly sought to centralize global jihadi activities so that AQC could oversee the affairs of regional groups and, if needed, veto certain decisions. It is possible that he wanted to make the most out of a bad, perhaps even doomed situation that al-Qa'ida was confronting after almost ten years of war. Indeed, the letter in which he proposed a blueprint for centralization is one of two letters that stand out for their reflective tone.⁵⁴ Not only is it the longest, consisting of 44 pages, but also because Bin Ladin comes across as someone taking stock of world events since the 9/11 attacks, burdened by the plethora of mistakes committed by regional jihadi groups, and eager to engage in a serious "assessment of jihadi activities" (*taqyim al-'amal al-jihadi*) as well as ways to ensure its sound "development/evolution" (*tatwir*).⁵⁵

It is also possible that Bin Ladin may have had other strategic considerations in mind, namely to find an alternative framework for mounting operations from outside Afghanistan and Pakistan. That is because the year 2010, during which he put these reflections in writing, witnessed the deaths of numerous senior al-Qa'ida leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The same letter in which Bin Ladin proposed centralization was also a letter of condolences to 'Atiyya whom he notified of several leadership appointments, including his own as the successor of Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid.⁵⁶ Abu'l-Yazid had served as the operational leader of al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan,⁵⁷ and had recently been killed in May 2010.⁵⁸

This must have been a particularly tough period for al-Qa'ida because another letter that Bin Ladin wrote to 'Atiyya shortly after also started with lines of condolences, indicating additional losses.⁵⁹ Thus, the losses al-Qa'ida suffered in 2010 in Waziristan and the poor conduct of regional jihadi groups compelled Bin Ladin to reassess existing

⁵³ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 44.

⁵⁴ The other letter is SOCOM-2012-0000010 in response to the Arab Spring, likely the last one he wrote.

⁵⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 3.

⁵⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 1-2.

⁵⁷ He was announced as leader of al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan in 2007. See the following report about him by *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 May 2007.

⁵⁸ Frank Gardner, "Death of Mustafa Abu al-Yazid 'Setback' for al-Qaeda," BBC, 1 June 2010. It was reported that a U.S.-operated unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) killed him in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area.

⁵⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000015, 1.

strategies. Two major concerns seem to have preoccupied him. First, he was keen for the talented “brothers” either to be evacuated safely from Waziristan or, if they must stay, to take stringent measures to avoid being captured or killed.⁶⁰ Bin Ladin’s letter was littered with detailed instructions to be followed to ensure the safety and security of the remaining “brothers” even if the work “should proceed at a slower pace during this period.”⁶¹

Bin Ladin’s second main concern was to find alternative places outside Afghanistan and Pakistan to mount “external operations.” He had received a letter from a “Shaykh Yunis” presenting him with a strategy on how al-Qa`ida could focus on putting together a secret operational force that could evade the eyes of the authorities. It is not clear whether this operational force was already in existence or whether it was meant to be a new one that Yunis developed and Bin Ladin should work on establishing. This force, Yunis explained, required coordination between AQI leaders and leaders of jihadi regional groups, but such a plan, he added, involves positive and negative consequences. On the positive front, the coordination between the leadership in Khurasan/Waziristan and the leaders of jihadi regional groups could yield productive results in operational terms.⁶² In Yunis’ words:

We (i.e., the operational force) do not need to claim/announce our [jihadi] activities – i.e., the activities that we carry out. There is a side [by which he implicitly refers to Bin Ladin] that is the focus of the eyes and hearts’ attention...that could claim [our jihadi activities]; alternatively you could advise [jihadi leaders] in the regions to claim it...this would allow the party involved in the [operational] work the freedom of movement, not to mention [the possibility] of perfecting means and ways of forgery (*tazwir*) and smuggling (*tahrib*) to become proficient in such skills. [We would also] train members to blend in with the public. All of this would allow us to melt/disappear (*dhawaban*) whenever we want, and this would have a more profound impact on covering our tracks after [we carry out] attacks.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁶¹ Ibid., 3.

⁶² The term Khurasan is often used in jihadi literature to designate Central Asia, but it is also used to refer to Afghanistan. See the discussion: al-Malahim wa-al-Fitan, “Khurasan: hal hiya Afghanistan?” <http://alfetn.net/vb3/showthread.php?t=17231> (accessed 26 April 2012). Although it could not be asserted, the location of Yunis was likely Waziristan.

⁶³ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 46.

Yunis then added some concerns. The first concern pertained to some of the “brothers” unproductive enthusiasm for jihad which causes failures in security; the other pertained to extremism and fanaticism in religion by some “brothers” who claim to be affiliated with al-Qa`ida. Yunis was referring to *takfiris*, i.e., jihadis who readily declare fellow Muslims to be unbelievers liable to be killed if they disagree with them over religious doctrines.⁶⁴ “You [i.e., Bin Ladin] experienced this problem [first hand] in Peshawar [in the 1980s] and you [also] saw its outcome in [Algeria],”⁶⁵ he warned Bin Ladin. In other words, Yunis warned Bin Ladin that unless the enthusiasts and religious extremists are brought in line, they would be a liability for such a strategy.

Shaykh Yunis is probably Yunis al-Muritani who was captured in Quetta, Pakistan, in September 2011.⁶⁶ He is reported to be in his mid-30s, and if he is indeed the same “Shaykh Yunis” it suggests that al-Qa`ida has managed during the past decade to attract jihadis who are distinguished by their strategic and operational visions. Yunis’ letter clearly left a powerful mark on Bin Ladin; Yunis’ strategic operational vision and his erudition, evidenced by citing examples from Islamic history in the appropriate places, must have immediately impressed Bin Ladin. He referred to Yunis as “shaykh,” not “brother” (*akh*), bestowing upon him a seniority status that Bin Ladin seemed to reserve for leaders of AQI, compared with the brotherly language he used when referring to regional jihadi leaders. He further shared Yunis’ letter with `Atiyya and instructed him to let Yunis know that he is to be dispatched to Africa and West Asia and be responsible for the “external work”⁶⁷ to be carried out “inside Western countries.”⁶⁸

Bin Ladin’s appointment of Yunis to head al-Qa`ida’s “external work” is a testament to his appreciation of Yunis’ letter. It is remarkable that Bin Ladin, who did not take appointing leaders lightly, nominated Yunis to a highly sensitive post even though he appeared to have known little about his background. In the same letter where he asked

⁶⁴ On the liability of *takfiris* to jihadism, see Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis’ Path to Self-Destruction* (New York/London: Columbia University Press/Hurst, 2010), 1-14.

⁶⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 48. For an expanded discussion of al-Qa`ida’s ideology as understood by its members in comparison with the rigid/extremist religious ideology as espoused by other jihadi groups, see Nelly Lahoud’s forthcoming CTC report based on Fadil Harun’s autobiography *al-Harb `ala al-Islam* (The War Against Islam: The Story of Fadil Harun).

⁶⁶ “Al-Qaeda Chief Younis al-Mauritani Held, Says Pakistan,” BBC, 5 September 2011; Mazin Aman, “al-`Arabiyya tazur usrat ‘Yunis al-Muritani’,” *al-`Arabiyya*, 7 September 2011; “I’tiqal fi Pakistan ma` ‘Unsurayn Barizayn bi-al-Tanzim,” *al-`Arabiyya*, 5 September 2011.

⁶⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 31.

⁶⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000015, 5. This reference suggests that Bin Ladin is clarifying what he wrote before, which suggests that the document was composed after SOCOM-2012-0000019.

'Atiyya to appoint him to head the "external work," he also asked him to send "at the earliest convenience a report about Shaykh Yunis that would include his date of birth, upbringing, academic studies, social status, experiences and skills; and also include [description] about his character and his manner of dealings with the jihadis and his relationship with them; and also the date when he joined [al-Qa'ida] (*dukhulih ma` al-multazimin*) and when he began to take part in jihad [on the battlefield] (*nafiruhu liljihad*)."⁶⁹

Other letters authored by Bin Ladin suggest that he was quite selective in his choice of leaders. It seems that Abu Basir (the alias of Nasir al-Wuhayshi) had suggested Anwar al-'Awlaqi to be his replacement as the leader of AQAP in Yemen, but Bin Ladin politely rejected the suggestion. If ever a slap and a kiss could be combined, Bin Ladin's response to Abu Basir could count as one. He complimented Abu Basir on being "qualified and competent" to manage the affairs of Yemen, but added that although his "positive attestation of al-'Awlaqi is duly acknowledged, we would like further assurances; for example, over here we are generally assured after people go to the battlefield and are tested there."⁷⁰ Despite the preoccupation with al-'Awlaqi among U.S. analysts and the intelligence community, this in itself does not appear to have earned him recognition in Bin Ladin's mind. Bin Ladin, wanting more evidence about al-'Awlaqi's suitability, asked that Abu Basir, Abu Sufyan, Sa'id al-Shihri and al-'Awlaqi write him separately with a "detailed conceptualization" of the way they each conceived of the events in Yemen. It is as if Bin Ladin was getting his red pen ready to grade, and even fail, the essays of each of these leaders.

How might centralization of global jihadi media and operational activities serve Bin Ladin's strategy? The plethora of mistakes that Bin Ladin enumerated about the conduct of regional jihadi groups suggests that he would partner with them only if they agreed to play by AQ's rules, hence the need for a memorandum. Bin Ladin perhaps reasoned that he would withhold the symbolic public blessing that seemed to matter to regional leaders in return for their compliance; since he was prepared to apologize for mistakes such as unintended civilian casualties, he may have even been willing to bestow the brand "al-Qa'ida" publicly if they would commit to the memorandum in writing.

The documents suggest that Bin Ladin also needed regional groups to give cover to al-Qa'ida's "external work" since the landscape of Waziristan was too closely monitored

⁶⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 33.

⁷⁰ SOCOM-2012-0000003, 2.

by U.S. intelligence to permit the safe work of the “brothers.” Bin Ladin, therefore, looked for alternative geographical arenas to facilitate either the continuation of “external work” in Western countries, with the United States on the top of his list, or start a new initiative. His immediate plan was to dispatch Yunis either to Yemen or Algeria or the surrounding areas of these two countries and wanted the leaders of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, and AQIM, Abu Mus`ab al-Wadud, to give Yunis their full cooperation. Specifically, Bin Ladin instructed `Atiyya to write to these two leaders asking them “to make their utmost efforts to cooperate with Shaykh Yunis in everything he asks of them,” and further asked the “brothers in the Islamic Maghrib to provide Yunis the financial support he needs, which may reach 200,000 euros in the next six months.”⁷¹ The request for such a sum may suggest that AQC’s financial situation was not self-sufficient if it needed to seek the assistance of the “affiliates,” and it may also suggest that Bin Ladin had a specific operation in mind that he wanted Yunis to carry out.

If the above speculations are plausible, the documents suggest that an AQC in sync with the affiliates on the operational level was being forged in 2010 to advance al-Qa`ida’s “external operations.” Even if the speculations are not entirely plausible, AQC and the affiliates appear to have had more differences than commonalities.

It is difficult to speculate on the prospects of Bin Ladin’s strategy. Still, even if its chances of success are slim, Bin Ladin’s strategy to centralize the public statements and activities of regional jihadi groups in the interest of efficiently advancing “external operations” is carefully considered. This strategy, along with Bin Ladin’s detailed instructions on the kind of measures the “brothers” must adopt to evade the authorities, are far more developed than the explicit operation he outlined to assassinate President Barack Obama and/or General David Petraeus who, at the time, was serving as the NATO commander of the International Security Assistance Force. Bin Ladin had asked `Atiyya’s predecessor, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, to task Ilyas, presumably Ilyas Kashmiri, to set up two units, one in Pakistan and another in Bagram, Afghanistan, to target airplanes known to be carrying President Obama and/or General Petraeus on their visits to these areas. He only wanted President Obama and General Petraeus to be targeted. He explained that the death of President Obama would see the “utterly unprepared” Vice President Joe Biden automatically assume the presidency, which would cause the United States to enter into crisis mode, and “the killing of Petraeus would have a serious impact on the course of the war,” as Bin Ladin considered him to be *“the man of*

⁷¹ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 32.

this [critical] phase.”⁷² Bin Ladin did not explain, however, why he did not want “Secretary of Defense Gates or the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mullen or the Special Envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan Holbrooke” to be targeted.⁷³ It is possible that Bin Ladin had prepared a more detailed plan in a previous letter, which might explain why the brief description available reads as an amateurish plot or just wishful thinking.

The Affiliates

The documents show that the so-called “affiliates” have not just been a problem for al-Qa’ida in terms of harming its image in the eyes of the majority of Muslims who have been the primary victims of their attacks, but the affiliates have also caused internal debates among the senior leadership. A panoramic view of the documents points to three different positions within al-Qa’ida on the subject. There are what one may term the “principled,” represented by Adam Gadahn, urging senior leaders to declare their distance and even to dissociate themselves from groups whose leaders do not consult with al-Qa’ida yet still act in its name. There are those represented by an anonymous author urging the opposite, believing that the inclusion of regional jihadi groups into the fold contributes to al-Qa’ida’s growth and expansion.⁷⁴ Bin Ladin represented a third position. Bin Ladin wanted to maintain communication, through his own pen or that of ‘Atiyya, with “brothers” everywhere, at least to urge restraint and provide advice even if it fell on deaf ears, but without franchising the brand.

The groups for which there is enough substantive content in the documents to gain a meaningful understanding of al-Qa’ida’s relationship with them are: Islamic State of Iraq (ISI/AQI), al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and to a lesser extent al-Shabab. AQIM is mentioned in a number of letters, but not as a separate subject of discussion that discerns how Bin Ladin viewed the group. There is also a letter dated 2006 forwarded to a certain ‘Abd al-Hamid. The actual letter was addressed to ‘Atiyya, consisting of legal questions from the group called Army of Islam (*Jaysh al-Islam*) based in Gaza.⁷⁵ The gist of the letter makes it known that the group is in need of financial assistance “to support jihad,” and the questions largely

⁷² SOCOM-2012-0000019, 35-36.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ SOCOM-2012-0000006, 1.

⁷⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000008. The letter is forwarded to a certain ‘Abd al-Hamid. Jaysh al-Islam emerged on the political scene in 2006 when it mounted a joint operation (with the support of the military wings of both Hamas and Fatah) that resulted in the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. See the analysis by Marwan Shehade, “Jaysh al-Islam al-Filastini ‘ala Khuta al-Qa’ida al-‘Alami,” *Majallat al-‘Asr*, 5 July 2006. Their relationship with Hamas quickly deteriorated and their questions to ‘Atiyya makes this clear; their global religious ideology was not compatible with Hamas’ nationalist focus.

pertain to the permissibility of accepting financial assistance from other militant Palestinian groups that are not purely fighting to establish God's Law in the eyes of Jaysh al-Islam (e.g., groups that are nationalists or supported by Iran).⁷⁶ The significance of the letter pertains to 'Atiyya's legal knowledge, but it does not point to a firm relationship between al-Qa'ida and Jaysh al-Islam.⁷⁷ 'Atiyya comes across as cordial but distant. He responded strictly to the questions posed but refrained from giving any strategic advice. It is possible that Jaysh al-Islam was "testing the water" to see whether al-Qa'ida would lend them financial support, not least because Hamas was fighting against them.⁷⁸

Given that the documents leave out many jihadi groups, the rest of the discussion in this section is thus limited to ISI/AQI, AQAP, TTP and al-Shabab.

Islamic State of Iraq/AQI

It should not come as a surprise to learn that Bin Ladin's public admission of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's group in Iraq⁷⁹ into the al-Qa'ida fold in December 2004⁸⁰ referred to in the secondary literature as AQI, became a liability, not an asset.⁸¹ Al-Zarqawi's group launched several indiscriminate attacks against Shi'ite civilians, and when Iraqi Sunni militants disapproved of his tactics he turned against them.⁸² The group's

⁷⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000008, 1.

⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that 'Atiyya refrained from answering questions that he did not deem himself qualified to address, such as whether it is lawful to invest money in the stock market if the profit is used to advance the cause of jihad. 'Atiyya confessed that this question required expertise he lacked and advised them to seek the opinion of learned legal scholars who specialize in these technical issues. He did not suggest the names of any legal scholars who have the necessary expertise, which may be an additional indication that he wanted to maintain a cordial but distant relationship with the group.

⁷⁸ See, for instance, Hamas's actions against Jaysh al-Islam over the kidnapping of the BBC reporter Alan Johnston, whose release Hamas secured. "Hamas Arrests over BBC Reporter," BBC, 2 July 2007.

⁷⁹ Al-Zarqawi's group was called Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad; when it was admitted into al-Qa'ida, it became known as al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia. After he was killed in 2006, and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi succeeded him, the group declared itself as the Islamic State of Iraq. The new name was highly controversial in jihadi circles.

⁸⁰ Usama bin Ladin, "Risala ila al-Muslimin fi al-'Iraq Khasatan wa-al-Umma al-Islamiyya 'Ammatan," December 2004 (CTC Library).

⁸¹ See, for instance, Ayman al-Zawahiri's letter to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original>, and 'Atiyyatullah al-Libi's letter to al-Zarqawi, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original>.

⁸² The Islamic Army of Iraq, "Rad al-Jaysh al-Islami fi al-'Iraq 'ala Khitabat al-akh Abi Omar al-Baghdadi," [http://www.arab-eng.org/vb/showthread.php/50571-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%81%D9%82%D9%86](http://www.arab-eng.org/vb/showthread.php/50571-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%81%D9%82%D9%86) (accessed 25 April 2012). See the discussion in Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction*, 205-211.

indiscriminate attacks did not improve with al-Zarqawi's death; Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Misri, who succeeded him and declared an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), were perceived by jihadi leaders to be more repulsive and dangerous than al-Zarqawi.⁸³ By 2007, Bin Ladin was publicly expressing his disappointment with jihadis in Iraq, urging them to form a unified front.⁸⁴

The documents confirm and provide additional insight into the grief ISI/AQI caused in many jihadi circles. A letter dated 28 March 2007,⁸⁵ addressed to a legal scholar by the name of Hafiz Sultan,⁸⁶ and authored by someone who is clearly of Egyptian origin,⁸⁷ shows that the author was alarmed by AQI's conduct and urged Sultan to write to its leaders to correct their ways: "I fear for the brothers from committing political mistakes, you have no doubt heard Abu 'Umar [al-Baghdadi's] recent speech; in my view, it contains obvious mistakes." In his mind, not only was the speech unfitting for a leader to make, but it also revealed that "they are extremists (*mutashaddidun*)...[and that his speech] is repulsive and lacks wisdom."⁸⁸ The author was by no means a distant or otiose observer; he assured Sultan that "I [already] wrote to them and rebuked them." He was appealing to Sultan because he knew him to be respected by and possibly related to "al-Karrumi," presumably Abu Hamza al-Muhajir/Abu Ayyub al-Misri, and wanted Sultan to exert pressure on him.⁸⁹

The author of the letter also urged Sultan to respond to the letters and grievances of "our brothers [Jaysh] Ansar al-Sunna, for they await your correspondence and responses to their complaints and letters."⁹⁰ It seems that Ansar al-Sunna, the temporary

⁸³ SOCOM-2012-0000011, 1. This letter is incorrectly dated in the English translation as 28 March 2011. It should be 28 March 2007. It was composed a few months before Ansar al-Sunna formed an alliance with other Sunni militant groups excluding AQI. The new alliance was formed in July 2007.

⁸⁴ Usama bin Ladin, "Ila Ahlina bi-al-'Iraq," http://www.iraqipa.net/10_07/21_25/News/a1_25okt07.htm (accessed 13 April 2012)

⁸⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000011.

⁸⁶ Hafiz Sultan is probably the same person who wrote articles for the magazine *Vanguards of Khurasan*. The magazine can be accessed on Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad at <http://www.tawhed.ws>.

⁸⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000011. The author uses Egyptian colloquial terms, such as "aw haddi min ikhwanina," and "ma ykhissinash."

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁹ Abu Hamza al-Muhajir/Abu Ayyub al-Misri is not reported to be known by the name al-Karrumi. However, since his name is used in the same sentence as Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi and since he is presumed to be in a leadership position, it would not be farfetched to assume that al-Karrumi is the same man.

⁹⁰ SOCOM-2012-0000011, 1.

name of Ansar al-Islam,⁹¹ had threatened to denounce AQI, and the author wanted to prevent this by asking Sultan to write to them, sympathize with their concerns, but also warn them that *fitna* (sedition/division) is worse and they must therefore stick with their fellow jihadis. His concerns were well placed. Within a few months of his letter, Ansar al-Sunna returned to using its original name Ansar al-Islam and formed an alliance with other Sunni militant groups, an alliance that excluded AQI.⁹²

A few months before Hafiz Sultan was urged to write to and counsel the leaders of AQI, it seems that a dispute was raging among religious scholars in Saudi Arabia. The dispute is discussed in one of the letters authored by an intermediary between some of these scholars and 'Atiyya, to whom the letter is addressed.⁹³ The letter was authored in early 2007 shortly after private meetings the intermediary held with several religious scholars during the Hajj (December 2006-January 2007). What is known publicly is a statement released in November 2006 and signed by 38 Saudi scholars in support of Iraq's Sunnis. It is characterized by a highly sectarian tone, accusing the Twelver Shi'ites of Iraq, whom they consider to be *rafida* (rejectionists), of "embracing the Crusaders and protecting their backs," putting into practice their "hateful creeds" ('*aqa'iduhum al-baghida*) against Sunnis.⁹⁴ This was followed by a statement that 'Atiyya released praising these scholars, taking it to mean support for jihadis, and singling out two of them, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak and 'Abdallah al-Ghunayman. 'Atiyya then added what was missing in their statement, calling on Sunnis in Iraq to join and support the

⁹¹ The group is based in Kurdistan. According to Abu 'Abdallah al-Shafi'i, the leader of Ansar al-Islam, the group was established in 2001, but it had to change its name to Ansar al-Sunna because it was the target of U.S. occupation forces in 2003. For some time, he explained, the group changed its tactics and expanded its operations to cover all of Iraq, and as of November 2007 the group resumed using its original name, Ansar al-Islam. The changing of its name in 2007 may have been to signal its separation from AQI. His statement is available on *Archive al-Jihad*,

https://www.jarchive.net/b/details.php?item_id=3511 (accessed 22 April 2012). He was reported to have been arrested by the U.S. Army in May 2010. See Shirzad Sheikhani, "Za'im 'Ansar al-Islam' Yantahi fi Qabdat al-Jaysh al-Amriki," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 5 May 2010.

⁹² Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2009).

⁹³ SOCOM-2012-0000014.

⁹⁴ "Nida' li-Ahl al-Sunna fi al-'Iraq wa-ma Yajibu 'ala al-Umma min Nasratihim," *al-Muslim*, <http://almoslim.net/node/46629> (accessed 22 April 2012). The term *rafida* is literally "those who reject." It is used in a pejorative way against Shi'ites to denote that they reject the legitimacy of the first three caliphs the Sunnis consider to have been lawful. The Twelver Shi'ites consider that 'Ali (the fourth caliph from the Sunnis' perspective) to have been the first lawful imam. For an academic study of the evolution of sects in Islam, see Patricia Crone, *God's Rule - Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), chapters 2-11.

Islamic State of Iraq (i.e., AQI).⁹⁵ The Islamic State of Iraq also released its own statement “blessing” the scholars’ statement.⁹⁶

According to the account of ‘Atiyya’s intermediary, the meeting during which Saudi scholars signed the statement was attended by 70 scholars, 32 of whom abstained from signing. Some, he related, disagreed with its wording, while others cited their fear of being suppressed or closely monitored by the authorities to justify their abstention.⁹⁷ More importantly, ‘Atiyya’s intermediary was told that the statement originally included four additional lines that were critical of the Islamic State of Iraq, declaring it to be unlawful. However, a group of scholars, led by al-Barak, insisted on deleting these lines, which forced others to concede in view of the importance of releasing the statement against the “Rafida” and ensuring that al-Barak was among the signatories to the statement.⁹⁸

A biography of al-Barak available on the internet indicates that he is a retired professor of religious sciences, who supervised many doctoral and masters’ theses, but refused several offers to become a member on the council that delivers formal legal opinions.⁹⁹ The explicit reference to his refusal is another way of making known that he refuses to hold an office that might compromise his principles and render him accountable to the ruling Saud family. In his meeting with ‘Atiyya’s intermediary, al-Barak expressed that he was touched and honored when ‘Atiyya singled him out in his statement and prayed for “victory for and consolidation of the Islamic State of Iraq.”¹⁰⁰ ‘Atiyya’s intermediary could not meet in person with ‘Abdallah al-Ghunayman, the other scholar singled out in ‘Atiyya’s statement, but he met with one of his students. He was told that al-

⁹⁵ ‘Aityyatullah, “Tabshir Qulub al-Mujahidin bi-Talahumi ahli al-‘Ilmi wa-al-Mujahidin,” *Multaqa Hadramut*, <http://www.hdrmut.net/vb/t227524.html> (accessed 22 April 2012).

⁹⁶ Islamic State of Iraq, “Dawlat al-‘Iraq al-Islamiyya tubarik bayan ‘Nida’ li-Ahl al-Sunna fi al-‘Iraq wa-ma Yajibu ‘ala al-Umma,”

<http://www.alaqsagate.org/vb/showthread.php?t=726&s=0c7651228409936e43d02f96df7fc84b> (accessed 26 April 2012).

⁹⁷ A number of the scholars who signed the statement are reported to be imprisoned by Saudi authorities. See Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad.

⁹⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000014, 4. This is a highly difficult text to read in Arabic; it was written in a hurry, it is littered with spelling mistakes and it lacks clarity in several critical places.

⁹⁹ “Nabdha Mukhtasara ‘an al-Sira al-Dhatiyya li-al-Sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Barak Hafizahu Allah,” <http://www.saaid.net/Warathah/1/albarak.htm> (accessed 22 April 2012). For informative background of the role of al-Barak and other Saudi scholars in supporting jihadis, see Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), particularly chapter 5. Also see Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, particularly chapter 7.

¹⁰⁰ SOCOM-2012-0000014, 4.

Ghunayman had made a promise not to publish his books during his lifetime, but happily changed his mind when one of his students suggested that he should publish them and donate the proceeds to the jihadis.¹⁰¹ Al-Ghunayman is a renowned religious scholar, having occupied several prestigious faculty positions, and his classes are reported to be highly sought after.¹⁰²

It is not clear from the letter if the support of these religious scholars extended beyond preaching and writing in support of jihadis. Yet the letter points to a certain “Shaykh Abu Zifr/Zafr” who is clearly in contact with ‘Atiyya on a more operational level through a different intermediary. His relationship with ‘Atiyya must have involved sensitive matters because he complained that the current intermediary through whom he communicated with ‘Atiyya was not trustworthy and could not be trusted with secrets if arrested.¹⁰³ He also indicated that of the 38 scholars who signed the statement in support of Iraq’s Sunnis, they do not all deserve to be praised, remarking that they are likely to “turn against you”; however, he did not object to singling out al-Barak and al-Ghunayman, both of whom are deserving of his praise.¹⁰⁴ Shaykh Abu Zifr/Zafr’s name does not appear in the statement; it is possible that it is an alias and that is why he could not be identified.

Three years after these debates, Bin Ladin remained concerned about divisions among jihadi groups in Iraq and hoped that they would re-unite after the killing of Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Misri. He asked ‘Atiyya to write him a report about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his deputy, Abu Sulayman al-Nasir, the new leaders of AQI.¹⁰⁵ He further added that “I would like for you to ask our brothers in Ansar al-Islam about their stance vis-à-vis the new leaders...and remind them to exert their utmost efforts to seek unity and resolve differences between the different jihadi entities in Iraq.”¹⁰⁶

In view of AQI’s liability to the image of jihad generally and of al-Qa’ida in particular, it stands to reason that it should serve as a point of contention among senior AQC leaders. No one among the main personalities who star in the documents comes across

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰² ‘Abdallah bin Muhammad al-Ghunayman, <http://www.alukah.net/Web/goniman/CV/> (accessed 22 April 2012).

¹⁰³ SOCOM-2012-0000014, 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 34. They were announced as leaders on 15 May 2010. See al-Shumukh, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=62187> (accessed 12 April 2012).

¹⁰⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 34.

more righteously critical than America's own Adam Gadahn. Gadahn's letter was meant to respond to Bin Ladin's queries about an effective media strategy, including engineering a way that would get American television channels to broadcast a speech by Bin Ladin on the tenth anniversary of 9/11.¹⁰⁷ Among the reasons Bin Ladin wanted a new strategy was to "make known the justice of our cause" to the world.¹⁰⁸ Gadahn capitalized on the "justice of our cause" and used it as an opening to highlight the injustices he believed the jihadis are committing, with AQI and TTP occupying the lion's share of his criticism.

Gadahn had planned to prepare an Arabic statement addressed to Christian Arabs. He wanted to warn them against collaborating with "the enemies of Islam," invite them to join Islam, and welcome today's "Islamic conquest," presumably by the jihadis, just as their ancestors did when the second Caliph 'Umar conquered Jerusalem.¹⁰⁹ In the collective memory of Muslims and Arab Christians, 'Umar is reputed for his respect of the religious rights of Christians. It is reported that on his tour of Jerusalem, 'Umar visited Christian churches but refrained from performing the Muslim prayer in one of them, likely the Holy Sepulcher, lest it be turned into an Islamic shrine after his death; he thus prayed outside the church where al-Aqsa Mosque was later built.¹¹⁰ Gadahn wanted to invoke the spirit of Islamic tolerance that 'Umar's reign evokes. His plan was thwarted, however, when a Catholic church in Baghdad was attacked by AQI, the organization "that we support and which – like it or not [...] – is known to the people as an Iraqi branch of the organization of al-Qa'ida."¹¹¹ He thus cancelled his plan because his appeal to Arab Christians would have no credibility in view of ISI/AQI's attacks targeting Christian churches.¹¹² He compared AQI's policy to that of President George W. Bush, who, in his mind, repelled the Europeans and the intellectuals of the world. In a perhaps constructive criticism of Bin Ladin, and to highlight the need for al-Qa'ida to dissociate itself from ISI/AQI, Gadahn passionately asked: "is this the justice that we preach and that Shaykh [Bin Ladin] preaches in his statements and letters?"¹¹³

Gadahn was clearly highlighting to AQC's leaders that they were just as guilty of the double standards they accused the West of perpetuating in the Muslim world. He was

¹⁰⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000004.

¹⁰⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000015, 8.

¹⁰⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000004, 6.

¹¹⁰ S.D. Goitein, "al-Kuds," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, online edition (accessed 28 April 2012).

¹¹¹ SOCOM-2012-0000004, 6.

¹¹² Ibid. On attacks against churches in Iraq, see Anthony Shadid, "Church Attack Seen as Strike at Iraq's Core," *New York Times*, 1 November 2010.

¹¹³ SOCOM-2012-0000004, 7.

alarmed by the gap between “the statements of our leaders and religious scholars and the actions of those who are said to be affiliated to or allied with them.”¹¹⁴ He thus advised that al-Qa’ida should take decisive public measures to dissociate itself from the “ignorant/ungodly criminality” (*al-ijram al-jahili*) of jihadi groups.¹¹⁵ In his words, al-Qa’ida should publicly:

...declare its disapproval of these and other actions that the organization so-called the Islamic State of Iraq (i.e., AQI) is carrying. [It should be made clear that AQI’s actions are being taken] without the orders of or consultation with al-Qa’ida. I believe that sooner or later – hopefully sooner – it is necessary that al-Qa’ida publicly announces that it severs its organizational ties with the Islamic State of Iraq, and [to make known] that the relationship between its leadership and that of the State [i.e., ISI/AQI] have not existed for several years, and that the decision to declare a State was taken without consultation with the leadership, and this [ill-considered] innovation (*qarar ijtihadi*) led to divisions among jihadis and their supporters inside and outside Iraq. [Thus] all that remains between al-Qa’ida and the State (i.e., AQI) is the tie that unites Muslims on the basis of faith, namely Islam, which makes it incumbent upon us Muslims to give advice [to our fellow Muslims when we deem it necessary], to command right and forbid wrong, and support and encourage doing good deeds.¹¹⁶

To date, none of the senior leaders have followed Gadahn’s advice, and it seems that he would not act unilaterally. He assured the person to whom he addressed his letter that “I only discuss this subject with shaykhs like you and occasionally with my brothers at al-Sahab.”¹¹⁷ By April 2011, it does not look like progress was made on the Iraq front. Bin Ladin was eager for ‘Atiyya to inform him about “correspondence with the brothers in Iraq, the details of its progress and the reasons behind its scarcity.”¹¹⁸ It is possible that this scarcity was due to security constraints facing AQI in Iraq. Alternatively, communicating with AQC leaders may not have been a priority for the “brothers” in Iraq, or they may have responded but ‘Atiyya did not share their letters with Bin Ladin.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 4.

AQAP

If the criticisms of AQI in the documents are not particularly surprising, the concerns Bin Ladin expressed about AQAP will no doubt be revealing to many.¹¹⁹ It is widely believed that AQAP is a success story from al-Qa`ida's perspective, especially since it is regularly described by senior U.S. government officials as the "most dangerous" of al-Qa`ida's affiliates.¹²⁰ Yet the documents show that at least in 2010 Bin Ladin was far from being impressed with the "brothers in Yemen." He comes across as critical of both their words and deeds, in particular the group's attacks in Yemen, its lack of acumen to win the Yemeni people's support, and the ill-advised public statements of its leaders. In fact, with the possible exception of AQI, none of the other "affiliates" appear to be more of a source of concern for Bin Ladin than AQAP.

To start with, Bin Ladin was anxious that AQAP was attempting to accomplish more ambitious actions than it was capable of sustaining. Even before the protests of February and March 2011 paralyzed the country, as thousands of Yemenis inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt took to the streets,¹²¹ AQAP was feeling emboldened. It appears that Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi) had sent a letter either to Bin Ladin or 'Atiyya in which he wrote that "if ever you wanted Sana'a, today is the day,"¹²² by which he meant that AQAP was ready to declare an Islamic state in Yemen and was possibly seeking a public blessing from AQI for its takeover plan. It also seems that Abu Basir had requested that a senior leader be dispatched to Yemen to help in the operational work.¹²³ Before responding to Abu Basir,¹²⁴ Bin Ladin had written at length to 'Atiyya about Yemen and told him that, in his mind, such an Islamic state, if prematurely declared before developing a firm foundation, is doomed to fail¹²⁵ and is likely to lead "to aborting the work [of jihad]."¹²⁶ At the time Bin Ladin was writing, in 2010, he believed that the circumstances were not yet ripe for declaring an Islamic state;

¹¹⁹ For further discussion of AQAP in light of the "documents," see forthcoming CTC paper by Gabriel Koehler-Derrick.

¹²⁰ "CIA Chief: Yemen Qaeda Affiliate Most Dangerous," Reuters, 13 September 2011.

¹²¹ These events culminated in former President Salih's formal ceding of power in late November 2011 in a deal negotiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). See Brian Whitaker, "Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh Resigns—But it Changes Little," *Guardian*, 24 November 2011.

¹²² SOCOM-2012-0000016, 1. The letter is authored either by Bin Ladin or 'Atiyya and the way it is composed makes it evident that the author was responding to several queries already put to him by Abu Basir in a letter that is not available.

¹²³ Ibid., 4.

¹²⁴ SOCOM-2012-0000016 is a letter addressed to Abu Basir, but it cannot be ascertained whether the letter reached him or not.

¹²⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 19.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 23.

instead, Yemen should serve as a reserve and support base for jihadis engaged in warfare on the open fronts (i.e., occupied Muslim countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan).¹²⁷

Underlying Bin Ladin's concern was a seeming distrust of AQAP's competence as a jihadi entity, not least its lack of a sound understanding of politics. It is possible that the 2003 premature campaign in Saudi Arabia by QAP — the group that merged with the Yemeni group in 2009 to form AQAP — weighed on his mind.¹²⁸ It would be naïve to assume, Bin Ladin wrote to 'Atiyya, that the general public would be prepared to fight simply because a group declared jihad to bring down the regime/state. Unless the timing is correct and the jihadis are capable of governing, he warned, a fragile Islamic state would let people down, "burdening them with pressure they cannot handle," and expecting them to suffer this pressure would have grave consequences.¹²⁹ People are likely to fight, Bin Ladin explained, when there is an external enemy, whose enmity they understand, occupying their country. Absent that, the tribal character of Yemen and the tribes' disposition to fight among themselves makes it highly likely that a civil war would erupt if AQAP entered into a long fight with the government.¹³⁰ AQI's loss of the tribes' support in Iraq appears to have been on Bin Ladin's mind. The 2003 U.S.-led occupation of Iraq saw Iraqi tribes joining forces with AQI to fight against the Americans, but when AQI began targeting members of the Anbar tribes, Bin Ladin lamented, the tribes turned against AQI with a vengeance.¹³¹

The Saudi government's response to an Islamic state in Yemen was an additional risk that entered Bin Ladin's calculations. Saudi rulers, he wrote to 'Atiyya, are already concerned about the jihadis' presence in neighboring Yemen, believing them to be "their worst enemies." Should the jihadis go on to declare an Islamic state, Saudi rulers would interpret such a declaration to be a threat to their stability; accordingly, they are sure to "pump vast amounts of money to mobilize Yemeni tribes to fight against us."¹³² The documents make clear that as of 2010, Bin Ladin believed that AQAP had neither the financial resources nor the manpower to withstand a sustained assault from the Yemeni government, Saudi money, and U.S. support. In the end, an ongoing civil war,

¹²⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 23-24.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 26-27.

¹³¹ SOCOM-2012-0000016, 12.

¹³² SOCOM-2012-0000019, 29-30.

he feared, would make secular governments appealing to the general public since they promote the slogan of compromise to appease the interests of all parties.¹³³

Beyond domestic considerations, Bin Ladin was worried about the amateurish, ill-advised and badly timed public statements released by AQAP's leaders, which is one of the reasons he suggested centralizing media releases. He was particularly disappointed with a public statement by one of the deputies of Abu Basir, Sa'id al-Shihri (known as Abu Sufyan al-Azdi), in which he demanded the release of Hayla al-Qasir who was arrested in Saudi Arabia for collecting money — more than \$500,000 according to media reports — to support jihadis.¹³⁴ Bin Ladin did not object to al-Shihri wanting to protect jealously the honor of Muslim women, but he was furious that al-Shihri chose to release his public statement at the same time the "Freedom Flotilla" was heading to Gaza to break Israel's blockade and bring aid to the people of Gaza. When Israeli forces killed some of the activists onboard, Bin Ladin observed, "Western politicians were forced to talk about this and criticize the Israelis."¹³⁵ In Bin Ladin's mind, the cause al-Shihri was voicing, notwithstanding his "praiseworthy jealousy," should not compete or even compare with the plight of a million and a half Palestinians in Gaza, many of whom are women and children, in addition to the 10,000 prisoners in Israeli jails.¹³⁶

On the basis of Bin Ladin's concerns and possibly those of 'Atiyya, the letter addressed to Abu Basir¹³⁷ is unambiguous and somewhat condescending in its tone. On the question of declaring a state, the author wrote: "[of course] we want [an Islamic state] in which we would establish God's Law," but only if "we are capable of holding on to it."¹³⁸ As if AQAP does not follow the news, the author deemed it necessary to explain the basics, namely that the United States, "despite it being weakened militarily and economically before and after [the attacks of 9/11], continues to have capabilities that would enable it to bring down any state that we might establish, even if the United States is incapable of maintaining the stability [of the countries it invades]."¹³⁹ The author reminded Abu Basir that if jihadis were unable to hold on to Afghanistan as an Islamic state in the face of the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, the chances of jihadis holding on to Yemen are even slimmer. The author warned that if jihadis do not learn from their

¹³³ Ibid., 26.

¹³⁴ Nasir al-Haqabani, "Hayla al-Qasir tajma' al-tabarru'at li-al-Qa 'ida wa-ta'wi al-matlubin wa-tujannid al-Nisa'," *al-Hayat*, 4 June 2010.

¹³⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 12.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 11-13.

¹³⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000016.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 2.

past mistakes, it “would make us like he who builds [a building] on the path of a torrential stream. If the building is swept away by the torrent and the owner decides to rebuild it on the same path, the people would run away.”¹⁴⁰ As to Abu Basir’s request for a senior leader to be dispatched to Yemen to assist in the operational work, this was politely denied, citing security related reasons that necessitated the avoidance of any movement except under special circumstances. This denial is quite telling. Although Bin Ladin was planning on dispatching Shaykh Yunis to the region and wanted him to link up with AQAP’s representatives so that they would give him money, Bin Ladin was not prepared to compromise the autonomy of Shaykh Yunis’ mission and ask him to “work” with them.

In practical terms, the letter to Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi) advised him to reach, through the mediation of scholars and tribal leaders, “a fair truce to bring stability to Yemen,”¹⁴¹ without agreeing to being disarmed.¹⁴² It is possible that the author feared that in the event that AQAP agreed to be disarmed, the group might be tempted to turn itself into a political party.¹⁴³ In reality, the author of letter 13 is not optimistic that such a truce would be successful; in fact, he is confident that ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih, Yemen’s president until 27 February 2012, would not agree to it. The intent, however, was to show the Yemeni public that jihadis seek peace and stability unlike the Yemeni government. More precisely, the author of the letter was confident that external pressures on the Yemeni government, particularly from the United States, would make it prone to making more mistakes, especially in its dealings with the tribes; thus, if jihadis forge good relationships with the tribes, they would stand to gain from the government’s losses.¹⁴⁴

In the meantime, and on the domestic front, jihadis should devote their energy not to jihad but to *i`dad*, or “preparing for jihad,” and the longer the regime clings to power and fails the people, the more time jihadis have for *i`dad* and to win the sympathy of the public.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, work must continue “to exhaust [economically and militarily] America from outside Yemen”; in this respect, Yemen would serve as a base from where jihadis could leave to mount “external operations.”¹⁴⁶ Lest he is misunderstood, the author of letter 13 specifically warned against targeting the Yemeni

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴² Ibid., 5.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

army and its police force: "The Americans are our desired goal,"¹⁴⁷ he stressed, and any work that is not directed against them weakens the mission. The author patiently explained this strategy to Abu Basir, using the metaphor of a tree:

The enemies of the *umma* today are like a malignant tree: it has a 50 cm American trunk and branches that differ in sizes, consisting of NATO members and many [apostate] regimes in the [Middle East and North Africa] region. We want to bring down the tree by sawing [its trunk], but our force and capability is limited. Thus, the sound and effective way to bring the tree down would be to focus our saw on its American root. [To be precise] if while [our energy] is focused on the trunk and we reach say 30 cms into its depth, should the opportunity of sawing into the British branch of the tree presents itself, we would not take it. [That is because preoccupying ourselves with the branches] would disrupt our efforts and energy; that is why we should stick to sawing the American trunk, for when the trunk is [sawn], the [branches] would all fall, if God so pleases.¹⁴⁸

The fact that AQAP continues to mount attacks against the Yemeni army and police since the letter was composed suggests that al-Wuhayshi either did not receive the letter or, if he did, was displeased with its content and ignored its directives.¹⁴⁹

Despite the clarity of Bin Ladin's (and possibly 'Atiyya's) strategic vision, there is an aura of insincerity or perhaps partial amnesia to the claim that al-Qa'ida has always focused on mobilizing the jihadis' energy exclusively against the United States. While it is true that on the operational level al-Qa'ida's attacks focused on the United States (e.g., 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, 2000 USS *Cole* bombing, the 9/11 attacks), Bin Ladin's public statements have often called on the youth in Muslim countries to rebel against their rulers, and jihad inside Saudi Arabia was the focus of one of his most aggressive statements. In December 2004, Bin Ladin confronted the "ruling family" directly, accusing it of "oppressing every reformist movement...on behalf of America and its allies." He proceeded to say that "it is not permitted for Muslims to agree to be governed by such rulers," concluding that the solution to the situation, "as explicitly stated in [God's] Law," entails "deposing the ruler." If the ruler refuses to step aside, Bin Ladin explained, "it would be necessary to rise up against him with arms to depose

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴⁹ For attacks in Yemen since then, see, for example, Robert Worth, "Chaos in Yemen Creates Opening for Islamist Gangs," *New York Times*, 27 June 2011; Laura Kasinof, "Death Toll Rises in Attack on Yemeni Army Base," *New York Times*, 5 March 2012.

him.” He further encouraged the jihadis to focus their attacks on what hurts most, namely oil infrastructure in the region.¹⁵⁰

One of the letters (document 15) dated September 2006 from a “loving brother” addressed to Bin Ladin is a serious rebuke of this policy, including the December 2004 statements that focused on Saudi Arabia, the place where the author of the letter was residing at the time (Riyadh).¹⁵¹ The author included all the necessary respectful rhetorical tools, referring to Bin Ladin as “Honorable Shaykh,” acknowledged that Bin Ladin’s gift to and precedence in the field of jihad “does not escape anyone during this era,” and expressed his “continued love and appreciation” despite circumstances preventing “ongoing correspondence” between the two.¹⁵² The author’s tone quickly changed, however, as he alerted Bin Ladin that when one is distant from reality, as Bin Ladin was because of security measures he was forced to take, the soundness of one’s judgment was bound to be impaired.¹⁵³ In a more aggressive tone, the author asked Bin Ladin about the rationale of focusing his energy on “Islamic countries in general and the Arabian Peninsula in particular.” The author reminded Bin Ladin that the Arabian Peninsula has a number of features that distinguish it, not least its financial support of the jihadis, serving “as the rear base of all jihadi activities around the world, from Afghanistan to Chechnya, Iraq and Palestine.”¹⁵⁴ Among the numerous negative consequences of engaging in jihad inside Saudi Arabia, the author informed Bin Ladin that people are now repulsed by the technical term “jihad” and it is even forbidden to use it in lectures. The author strongly advised Bin Ladin to change his policy, consoling him that even the seventh century commander Khalid bin al-Walid erred; in other words, Bin Ladin would still be in good company but only if he took measures to rectify his recent mistakes.¹⁵⁵

Despite its damning critique of his policy, Bin Ladin kept the letter.¹⁵⁶ While the anonymous author’s advice is echoed in Bin Ladin’s letters composed in 2010, the letter did not cause him to alter his public statements and does not explain the inherent

¹⁵⁰ Usama bin Ladin, “Risala ila Ahl Bilad al-Haramayn Khasatan wa-Bilad al-Muslimin ‘Ammatan,’” 16 December 2004 (CTC Library).

¹⁵¹ It is difficult to guess the identity of this “loving brother.” Is it possible that he might be AFGP-2002-003251 (Harmony document), Abu Hudhayfa, ‘ila al-Akh al-Fadil al-Sheikh al-Jalil Abi ‘Abdallah, dated 20 June 2000. He has a similar style: cordial but does not hesitate to criticize in a blunt manner.

Regardless, the author clearly knows Bin Ladin well.

¹⁵² SOCOM-2012-0000018, p. 1.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵⁶ Unless the document was deleted and recovered.

contradiction between his earlier speeches and his disapproval of rebelling against the Yemeni government as the letter to Abu Basir makes clear. That is because as late as 2009, almost three years after receiving this letter, Bin Ladin continued to call on people to depose their rulers. In March 2009 and in a statement he released about Palestine, Bin Ladin warned that “unless we understand that our countries are occupied in the interests of the rulers and their mandators/overseers (*muwakkilihim*),” by which he meant Western powers, “and unless we work to uncover the truth of [these rulers], fight against them, depose them and liberate ourselves from their dominion, we shall never be able to liberate Palestine.”¹⁵⁷

One cannot help but wonder whether Abu Basir responded to Bin Ladin’s (or ‘Atiyya’s) letter, if he ever received it. If he did not receive it, the public release of the letter with this report might give him the opportunity to reflect not just on Bin Ladin’s inconsistencies, but also on how little the “shaykh” thought of AQAP. It was probably the lack of discipline among AQAP’s members and the enthusiasm and ignorance of “the new generations of young men who joined the path of jihad”¹⁵⁸ that caused Bin Ladin to conclude that AQAP could not be trusted to mount qualitative attacks inside Yemen without massive civilian casualties.

TPP

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is believed to be one of al-Qa’ida’s primary partners in that region. Although the TTP has not pledged allegiance to al-Qa’ida, it is reported that al-Qa’ida fighters active in the Waziristan region have had operational ties to factions of the TTP and have conducted joint operations in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁹ Al-Qa’ida leaders active in the Waziristan region have also operated in the same social orbit as former TTP leader Baitullah Mahsud (and, after his death, current leader Hakimullah Mahsud) and worked together to address disputes.¹⁶⁰

Letters authored by Bin Ladin did not discuss at length his views of the TTP, but the few scattered references in which he mentioned the group are far from flattering.¹⁶¹ The documents make it clear that Bin Ladin was not informed of the TTP’s planned

¹⁵⁷ Usama bin Ladin, “Khutuwat ‘Amaliyya li-Tahrir Filastin,” March 2009 (CTC Library).

¹⁵⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000016, 6

¹⁵⁹ For example, see “Hearing to Continue to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan,” Senate Armed Services Committee, 16 June 2010, 14.

¹⁶⁰ For example, see Joby Warrick, *The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole who Infiltrated the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 72.

¹⁶¹ For further analysis of the TTP in light of the “documents,” see forthcoming CTC paper by Don Rassler.

bombing of Times Square in New York City, a failed attack on U.S. soil attempted by Faisal Shahzad in May 2010. Bin Ladin was following Shahzad's trial in the news and was disappointed by his performance, which he thought distorted the image of jihadis:

You have perhaps followed the media trial of brother Faisal Shahzad, may God release him, during which the brother was asked to explain his attack [against the United States] in view of having taken an oath [not to harm it] when he was awarded his American citizenship. He responded that he lied [when he took the oath]. It does not escape you [Shaykh 'Atiyya] that [Shahzad's lie] amounts to betrayal (*ghadr*) and does not fall under permissible lying to [evade] the enemy [during times of war]...please request from our Pakistani Taliban brothers to redress this matter...also draw their attention to the fact that brother Faisal Shahzad appeared in a photograph alongside Commander Mahsud. I would like to verify whether Mahsud knew that when a person acquires an American citizenship, this involves taking an oath, swearing not to harm America. If he is unaware of this matter, he should be informed of it. Unless this matter is addressed, its negative consequences are known to you. [We must therefore act swiftly] to remove the suspicion that jihadis violate their oath and engage in *ghadr*.¹⁶²

This is not the only instance that Bin Ladin worried about jihadis violating their oaths. The letter addressed to Abu Basir in which he is asked to focus on operations inside the United States (instead of Yemen) alerted him to focus on Yemenis "who hold either visas or U.S. citizenships to carry out operations inside America as long as they did not take an oath not to harm America."¹⁶³ Underlying Bin Ladin's thinking is a distinction between a visa (*ishara*), acquired citizenship — which involves taking an oath (*ahd*) — and citizenship by birth — which does not entail taking an oath. From an Islamic law perspective, it is not lawful to violate one's oath (*naqd al-`ahd* or *naqd al-mithaq*). Accordingly, Bin Ladin wanted to promote the image that jihadis are disciplined and conform to Islamic Law. Faisal Shahzad's boasting that he lied during his oath not to harm the United States, therefore, is antithetical to the image of jihadis that Bin Ladin wanted the world to see.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² SOCOM-2012-0000015, 7.

¹⁶³ SOCOM-2012-0000016, 4.

¹⁶⁴ Bin Ladin may also have had in mind the debate between Ayman al-Zawahiri and his former mentor, Dr. Fadl. The latter reneged on his jihadi views and among the accusations he made was that the 9/11 hijackers violated the terms of their visa, interpreting it as a form of *aman* (safe passage) from an Islamic law of war perspective. Thus, from Bin Ladin's perspective, it is only when a Muslim takes an oath that he must be bound by it; a visa and citizenship by birth do not qualify as an oath.

It is not just the lapses in the public statements of TTP that worried Bin Ladin. The group's indiscriminate attacks against Muslims are also a subject of concern that he raised with 'Atiyya. In particular, he drew his attention to an operation the TTP carried out against one of the tribes on the basis that the tribe was against the Taliban. "Even if this were to be proven, it does not justify the operation in view of the non-combatants who died, for that would contradict the [Islamic] legal basis of our politics," Bin Ladin wrote. "I therefore urge you to continue advising TTP [to reform their ways]."¹⁶⁵ This TTP attack was not an isolated incident; their indiscriminate attacks, including targeting Muslims in mosques, is the subject of a long list of serious concerns that Adam Gadahn enumerated in his letter.¹⁶⁶

It was left to 'Atiyya and Abu Yahya al-Libi to write a letter addressed to the "respected brother" Hakimullah Mahsud, the leader of the TTP. Its content hardly reflected any respect for Mahsud. The authors did not mince words, explicitly stating their dissatisfaction with the TTP's "ideology, methods and behavior." These, they stated, are marred with "clear legal errors and dangerous lapses," and unless the group changes its ways, its errors would be a "cause of great corruption of the jihadi movement in Pakistan." News had reached 'Atiyya and al-Libi that Mahsud had declared himself to be "the singular leader to whom everyone must pledge allegiance and declaring anyone who rebels against him (*kharij 'alyhi*) or is not in his Tehrik to be a rebel (*baghi*)."¹⁶⁷ In classical Islamic political parlance, dissenters (*khawarij*) and rebels (*bughat*) who renounce the authority of the legitimate imam are subject to jihad and liable to be killed. Thus, Mahsud's announcement amounted to declaring himself to be the great imam with political authority over all Muslims, so 'Atiyya and al-Libi found it necessary to point out to him that there is a difference "between the [minor] position of leader of jihad and that of great imam," a distinction with which Mahsud should familiarize himself.¹⁶⁸

It also seems that Mahsud or members of his group had referred to al-Qa'ida as "guests." In response, 'Atiyya and al-Libi explained to Mahsud that "we in al-Qa'ida (Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad) are an international Islamic-jihadi organization, we are not bound by country or race. In Afghanistan, we pledged allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful Mullah Muhammad 'Umar, [we recognize him to be] a mujahid and the

¹⁶⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 9.

¹⁶⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000004, 11-13.

¹⁶⁷ See Khadduri, *Islamic Law of Nations*, 230, footnote 1.

¹⁶⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000007, p. 1.

commander of the faithful of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. From his side, it is permitted for us to be involved in general jihadi work...we would like to make clear to you that this description [of 'guests'] lacks a legal basis, and that Muslims are brothers in religion."¹⁶⁹ The letter concluded with an unambiguous threat: "unless we see from you serious and immediate practical and clear steps towards reforming [your ways] and dissociating yourself from these vile mistakes [that violate Islamic Law], we shall be forced to take public and firm legal steps from our side."¹⁷⁰ 'Atiyya's and al-Libi's letter was not the first warning issued to the TTP by the leadership of al-Qa'ida. In light of its rebuking tone, an examination of some of 'Atiyya's and Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid's statements a year prior to the drafting of the letter makes it clear that their condemnation of the indiscriminate targeting of Muslims in mosques and marketplaces was an implicit criticism of the TTP.¹⁷¹ It is either that the TTP was too slow to understand that these public statements were implicitly criticizing their actions or simply pretended that they did not understand.

Al-Shabab

Al-Shabab is not extensively discussed in the documents, but there are enough references that reflect Bin Ladin's displeasure with the group's style of governance. There is also a letter authored by Bin Ladin and addressed to the leader of al-Shabab, Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr. It seems that Abu al-Zubayr had sent a letter to Bin Ladin in which he requested formal unity with al-Qa'ida and either consulted him on the question of declaring an Islamic state in Somalia or informed him that he was about to declare one.

On the question of formal unity with al-Qa'ida, Bin Ladin politely declined, although he acknowledged that this is a "legal duty" (*wajib shar'i*), by which he meant that such a duty is incumbent upon all Muslims to work towards and implement when circumstances are conducive. Bin Ladin cited two reasons to explain why he discouraged formal unity. First, he indicated that it would give the "enemy" the excuse to mobilize its forces against Somalia; further, without formal unity, it would remain feasible for foreign aid to reach Muslims in need in Somalia.¹⁷² The second reason Bin Ladin cited is the extreme poverty in Somalia as a result of ongoing wars. He further wanted to promote economic development to enhance people's lives. "I am

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷¹ Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid, "Blackwater and the Peshawar Bombings," *al-Sahab*, 11 November 2009; "Statement by Shaykh Atiyatallah about the Peshawar Bombings," November 2009 (Released by Al-Fallujah Islamic Forum in January 2010).

¹⁷² SOCOM-2012-0000005, pp. 1-2.

determined,” he wrote to Abu al-Zubayr, “to urge merchants in the Gulf states in one of my public statements to [invest] in effective and important developmental projects. These would not be too costly, we have already tested such projects in Sudan. Thus the absence of a public affiliation between the jihadis [in Somalia] with al-Qa`ida would strengthen the position of merchants who desire to help their [Muslim] brothers in Somalia.”¹⁷³

On the question of declaring a state (*dawla*), Bin Ladin advised against it. Yet if al-Shabab believed it was necessary to formalize their authority in Islamic terms, Bin Ladin suggested that the group declare an *imara*, an emirate/province, not a state, and call it “the Islamic Emirate of Somalia.”¹⁷⁴ In Islamic political parlance, an *imara* is part of a broader Islamic state/dynasty; it is headed by an *amir* who is a representative of the caliph/greater imam. As with Yemen, Bin Ladin urged Abu al-Zubayr to restrain his ambitious plans. He concluded his letter to Abu al-Zubayr with gentle advice on governance: “[just as] I urge myself, I urge you to hold on to piety, patience, and perseverance and to adhere to noble characters, those to which when an *amir* adhere, the affairs of his citizenry would improve.” He further explained to Abu al-Zubayr that the leader’s wisdom is manifest through “his forgiveness, justice, patience and good relationship with his citizenry.”¹⁷⁵ Bin Ladin’s advice is not for stylistic flourish; it is intended to signal to Abu al-Zubayr that his leadership is ultimately measured by how well Somalis are governed and their needs met.

Bin Ladin’s concern over al-Shabab’s mode of governance was explicitly articulated in a letter to ‘Atiyya. He asked ‘Atiyya to enquire from “the brothers in Somalia” about the economic situation of the states under their authority: “it does not escape you [Shaykh ‘Atiyya] that attending to people’s livelihood is an important objective, according to the Law, and it is one of the most important duties of the leader. It is therefore necessary to seek to create an economic force [in Somalia towards achieving this end].” Bin Ladin had apparently sent ‘Atiyya some suggestions on how to improve the economy, but ‘Atiyya either ignored them or had not attended to them.¹⁷⁶

In addition to al-Shabab’s neglect of building a viable economy, Bin Ladin was also worried about the group’s rigid approach to Islamic Law, specifically its inflexible

¹⁷³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 1.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 5.

application of the *hudud*, or deterrent penalties for certain crimes.¹⁷⁷ He must have thought that the group was applying penalties with excess and asked `Atiyya to write “to our brothers in Somalia with some advice on how to deal with those whose offenses are ambiguous (*al-mushtabah bihim*) so that they may heed the prophetic hadith ‘avert the *hadd* penalties by means of ambiguous cases’ (*idra’u al-hudud bi-al-shubuhat*).”¹⁷⁸ Bin Ladin was referring here to a hadith, a report attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which has served as a basis for jurists to avoid the imposition of severe penalties.¹⁷⁹

Bin Ladin’s letter to Abu al-Zubayr has echoes of the “it’s not you, it’s me” excuse. Why should he deny al-Shabab official membership in al-Qa`ida yet still honor Abu al-Zubayr with a personal and cordial letter that he could have asked `Atiyya to write on his behalf? It is possible that he had been sending personal letters to other regional leaders, believing that even though he could not control them, it was still his duty to continue to advise them to change their ways, in which case his letter to Abu al-Zubayr would fit this pattern. It is also possible that Bin Ladin’s reasoning may not have been entirely noble; it may be that al-Shabab was trying to *purchase* its way into al-Qa`ida. In what was probably his last letter, Bin Ladin asked `Atiyya to inform him of the “sums of money in support of jihadis coming from inside and outside Pakistan, and to itemize separately the sums arriving from each region; and of these to explain what happened with respect to the sum from the brothers in Somalia mentioned in your letter.”¹⁸⁰ In itself, the reference to a distinct sum from Somalia is obviously not conclusive that al-Shabab was attempting to *purchase* use of the brand, but it may suggest that the sum from Somalia stood out in relation to others. If this is a plausible observation, then it might explain Bin Ladin’s position: although he was not prepared to “franchise” al-Qa`ida’s brand, fearing that al-Shabab’s shortcomings would be a liability, he still deemed it necessary to be cordial to the leader of al-Shabab to ensure the group’s continued financial support of jihadi activities, (mis)leading Abu al-Zubayr to think that al-Shabab could eventually be granted membership. Nine months after Bin Ladin’s death, Ayman al-Zawahiri delivered to al-Shabab what Bin Ladin had denied them. Al-Zawahiri and Abu al-Zubayr released a public statement announcing the union

¹⁷⁷ On al-Shabab’s rigid application of the *hudud*, see Al-Qimma Islamic Network, “Tatbiq Hadd al-Rajm wa-Hadd al-Harabah bi-Wilayat Shbili al-Wista al-Islamiya,” <http://al-qimma.net/showthread.php?t=24727&langid=2> (accessed 26 April 2010).

¹⁷⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 5.

¹⁷⁹ See E.K. Rowson, “Shubha,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill, 2012). Edited by: P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; C.E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs.

¹⁸⁰ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 8.

between the two groups as a testimony that the “jihadi movement is growing with God’s help.”¹⁸¹

Bin Ladin’s decision not to grant al-Shabab a public union with al-Qa’ida is intriguing in another respect. A close reading of a related letter may suggest that Bin Ladin’s denial was the subject of internal debate within al-Qa’ida and possibly behind his back.¹⁸² The author of the letter was concerned with the content of another letter to which he was made privy. He referred to it as the “letter of our friend” (*risalat sahibina*) and explained that:

...it is possible that the reason behind it is the fear of those brothers from the expansion and growth of the size of al-Qa’ida, with God’s grace and power. They believe that being burdened by this expansive body is weighty on their neck and their capability cannot sustain it. It would make them liable to problems with many sides, especially since they desire or hope to pursue the path of construction and development. That is why they are satisfied with those who seek them, but do not see [the need] to go beyond that...That is why I believe it is necessary to affirm al-Qa’ida’s ties to its branches and make it public as a fait accompli and useless to deny...Therefore, I hope that you would reconsider your decision of not declaring publicly the union with the brothers in Somalia simply because we might be pressured in the future to declare that we are not affiliated with them or others.¹⁸³

This letter suggests that Bin Ladin’s position was subject to internal criticism. The pursuit of “construction and development,” which Bin Ladin outlined in his letter to Abu al-Zubayr was atypical al-Qa’ida discourse and was not welcomed by the author of this letter. Furthermore, it suggests that some were frustrated with Bin Ladin’s reluctance to welcome publicly groups pledging allegiance to al-Qa’ida, accusing him of “being burdened by this expansive body” instead of seeing it as a sign of “God’s grace.” The only regional jihadi group that Bin Ladin publicly granted a formal affiliation is al-Qa’ida in Mesopotamia (AQI); all other groups that were formalized to be in the fold of al-Qa’ida were announced by Ayman al-Zawahiri.

¹⁸¹ “Bushra Sarra,” *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam*, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=148330> (accessed 30 April 2012).

¹⁸² See Appendix for alternative readings of this letter.

¹⁸³ SOCOM-2012-0000006, 1.

If Bin Ladin was in charge of AQC, the content of his correspondence suggests that he did not enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the affiliates on the operational front. The documents reveal that Bin Ladin was burdened by what he viewed as the affiliates' incompetence: specifically a lack of political acumen, an inability to win public support, and most importantly poorly planned operations that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Muslims. If AQC lacks the ability to exert control over its supposed affiliate groups — whether distant groups like AQAP or so called "fellow travelers" like the TTP that are active in the geographical space where it is based — it stands to reason that the power and clout AQC is meant to exert over the global jihadi landscape is most doubtful.

III- Al-Qa`ida Ties to Iran and Pakistan?

While the documents speak volumes about Bin Ladin's dwindling control over the movement that he helped to cultivate and inspire, they are less clear on the role of two powerful regional actors, Iran and Pakistan, frequently accused of enjoying ties to the group. Nonetheless, given the limited amount of reliable available information on this issue, the documents shed some light on how al-Qa`ida viewed these two key actors. Relations between al-Qa`ida and Iran appear to have been highly antagonistic, and the documents provide evidence for the first time of al-Qa`ida's covert campaign against Iran. This battle appears to have been an attempt to influence the indirect and unpleasant negotiations over the release of jihadis and their families, including members of Bin Ladin's family, detained by Iran. References to Pakistan are much too scattered to provide a coherent presentation of al-Qa`ida's relationship with the Pakistani government, but the few mentions of the Pakistani security forces in the document do not *explicitly* point to any institutional Pakistani support to Bin Ladin.

Iran

The relationship between al-Qa`ida and Iran is one of the least understood aspects about al-Qa`ida's history. Due to the scarcity of reliable public information to elucidate the nature of this connection, theories vary widely.¹⁸⁴ The Western frontier of

¹⁸⁴ One of the earliest reported links between al-Qa`ida and Iran comes from the testimony of Jamal al-Fadl – a former member of al-Qa`ida who defected and became an informant for the U.S. government. During his trial testimony (against Bin Ladin) in February 2001, al-Fadl described contact that four al-Qa`ida members – Abu Talha al-Sudani, Abu Jaffar al-Misri, Sayf al-Misri (see below), and Sayf al-`Adl – allegedly had with Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon in the 1990s. To the authors' knowledge, this information has not been corroborated. See *USA v. Osama bin Laden*, et. al., United States District Court Southern District of New York, 6 February 2001, <http://cryptome.org/usa-v-ubl-02.htm>. For background

Afghanistan bordering Iran was considered by al-Qa'ida strategists as an alternative base for their activities to escape and evade the intrusion of U.S. Special Operations Forces that were targeting them prior to the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Sayf al-'Adl, one of al-Qa'ida's tier-one leaders, related in his publicly available writings that the choice of this geographical location was due to its close proximity to the safest route available to the "brothers," namely Turkey-Iran-Afghanistan. "Pakistani authorities," he explained, "were beginning to exert pressure on us and closely monitor our movements, making it very difficult for Arab brothers and others to reach Afghanistan via Pakistan." Al-'Adl further related that they established links with some supporters in Iran, but not with the Iranian government; some "brothers" from Gulbuddin Hikmatyar's Islamic Party (al-Hizb al-Islami) made available to them some apartments and farms that they owned in Iran. Many families, he wrote, headed to Iran following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 presumably expecting to be left alone, but before long Iranian authorities, pressured by the U.S. government in his view, began a campaign of arresting people and deporting them to their home countries.¹⁸⁵

When he wrote this article, al-'Adl himself was believed to be detained by Iranian authorities, and this may have constrained his ability to provide elaborate details as to the Iranian regime's rationale with respect to detaining jihadis. Nevertheless, his account provides a plausible rationale as to why al-Qa'ida would look to Iran, namely as a passage or a base that appeared to provide safety for its members or other jihadis. Al-Qa'ida did not appear to have looked to Iran from the perspective that "the enemy of my (American) enemy is my friend," but the group might have hoped that "the enemy of my (American) enemy would leave me alone." Al-'Adl's explanation about the clampdown by Iranian authorities, however, is not satisfactory because they did not deport all jihadis, and the documents reveal that Iran was releasing jihadis and their families as recently as 2011.

The documents provide insights on al-Qa'ida and Iran starting in 2009. In a letter dated 11 June 2009, authored by 'Atiyya and addressed to "our venerable shaykh," Bin Ladin or possibly another senior leader, he wrote that "I am delighted to inform you that the Iranians released a group of brothers in several batches last month."¹⁸⁶ The list included

on these debates, see Bruce Riedel, "The Mysterious Relationship between al-Qa'ida and Iran," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 7 (2010).

¹⁸⁵ Sayf al-'Adl, "Tajrubati ma` Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi," *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad*, <http://www.tawhed.ws>.

¹⁸⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000012, 1. The names of the released and their profiles are as quoted in the letter: "Abd al-Muhayman al-Misri and his family; Salim al-Misri (of the Jihad Group) – the term used for "of" (amta') could mean "of the baggage" – which could imply a pejorative sense) – and his family; Abu Suhayb al-

a number of legacy al-Qa`ida members (described as mid-level brothers) whose ties to the group stretch back to the 1990s.¹⁸⁷ In the document, `Atiyya further indicated that the Iranians told the person liaising between the two parties that they would soon be delivering to him the family of “Azmarai” (Bin Ladin), “perhaps even within a week.”¹⁸⁸ The initial promise was that they would release “the family (women and children, excluding the men).”¹⁸⁹ The Iranians also leaked to those whom they released that they planned to free more prisoners in the near future.¹⁹⁰

Makki (of Yemeni origin: during the Crusader campaign, he served as the bodyguard of Shaykh Abu Suleiman al-Makki al-Harbi) and his family; al-Zubayr al-Maghribi (a brother who used to work with the Libyan Fighting Group) and his family; on his way (he might be in Quetta or thereabout, importantly, he crossed the Iranian border, and may God deliver him [safely] is Khalifa al-Misri and his family.”

¹⁸⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000012, 2; According to Fadil Harun, *al-Harb `ala al-Islam*, p. 374, `Abd-al-Muhayman’s family was chosen to be among those families to live in the newly constructed compound in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 1998, illustrating that he has been associated with the group since at least that time. See also Harmony document AFGP-2002-600046, 2. Salim al-Misri was an explosives trainer at al-Qa`ida’s Jihad Wal camp in the late 1990s. He was also one of the al-Qa`ida members believed to have received training from Hezbollah in explosives. See *USA v. Osama bin Laden*, et. al., United States District Court Southern District of New York, 6 February 2001, <http://cryptome.org/usa-v-ubl-02.htm>. In 1996, Salim al-Misri lived in Saudi Arabia and members of his family in Sudan. See Harmony document AFGP-2002-000232, 9 (of the original Arabic); Abu Suhayb al-Makki (Muhammad Ali Qasim Yaqub) was detained by Pakistani authorities in Karachi several weeks after Bin Ladin’s death. According to press accounts, Abu Suhayb al-Makki is “said to have worked directly under the al-Qaida leadership along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.” See Declan Walsh, “Pakistan Hones in on Osama bin Laden Network with Arrest of al-Qaeda Man,” *Guardian*, 17 May 2011.

¹⁸⁸ Although this cannot be ascertained, it is possible that Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil (aka Yasin al-Suri) and/or Salim Hasan Khalifa Rashid al-Kuwari helped to facilitate the transfer and travel of these individuals from Iran to Pakistan. See “Treasury Targets Key Al-Qa`ida Funding and Support Network Using Iran as a Critical Transit Point,” 28 July 2011.

¹⁸⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000012, 2.

¹⁹⁰ According to `Atiyya, the next group would include Abu Hafs al-`Arab, Abu Ziyad al-`Iraqi, and Abu `Amru al-Misri. See SOCOM-2012-0000012, 2. In an interview conducted by *al-Hayat*, a former al-Qa`ida member “Muhammad al-Tamimi” mentioned the name Abu Hafs al-`Arab as one of the leaders of the Egyptian Jihad Group who was among those he met in al-Dahhak house in Kandahar in December 2001. See <http://www.jammoul.net/forum/showthread.php?t=1628> (accessed 30 April 2012); Abu Hafs al-`Arab’s name is also mentioned in a captured document that summarizes the interrogations of several Arabs detained by al-Qa`ida and the Taliban on suspicions that they were spying for foreign intelligence services during the late 1990s. The document suggests that Abu Hafs al-`Arab had a relationship with Sayf al-`Adl and could have been involved in security issues. See Harmony document AFGP-2002-800775, 75. Two other Harmony documents identify Abu Hafs al-`Arab as a member of al-Qa`ida. See AFGP-2002-600046, 2 and AFGP-2002-600177, 2. Abu Ziyad al-`Iraqi’s name appears in a letter sent from `Abd al-Wakil al-Somali to Abu al-Faraj. In the letter, Abu al-Faraj is informed that Abu Ziyad will be coming to his area per the direction of “Shaykh Abu Hafs” (likely a reference to Abu Hafs al-Misri). The document suggests that Abu Ziyad knew Abu Hafs or worked on his behalf. See Harmony document AFGP-2002-800636, 1. For additional background on other al-Qa`ida members believed to be in Iran, see

If `Atiyya's explanation is credible, then the Iranians were not releasing jihadi prisoners to forge a bond or strengthen an existing one with al-Qa`ida. Rather, `Atiyya was of the view that "we believe that our efforts, which included escalating a political and media campaign, the threats we made, the kidnapping of their friend the commercial counselor in the Iranian Consulate in Peshawar, and other reasons that scared them based on what they saw [we are capable of], to be among the reasons that led them to expedite [the release of these prisoners]."¹⁹¹ The commercial counselor at the Iranian Consulate to whom `Atiyya was referring is Hesmatollah Atharzadeh-Nyaki; he was kidnapped in Peshawar in November 2008¹⁹² and released in March 2010.¹⁹³ A few weeks before he was kidnapped, Abdul Khaliq Farahi, the Afghan consul general in Peshawar, was also kidnapped. Six months into his ordeal, he found himself sharing a room on and off for a year with none other than Atharzadeh. Farahi believed that his kidnappers were al-Qa`ida, and they seemed to have had links with Pakistani militants.¹⁹⁴

It is significant to note that the Iranians do not appear to have made direct contact with al-Qa`ida, at least not in the initial stage. `Atiyya's frustration could not be clearer: "But the criminals did not send us any letter, nor did they send us a message through any of the brothers [they released]! Such behavior is of course not unusual for them; indeed, it is typical of their mindset and method. They do not wish to appear to be negotiating with us or responding to our pressures, as if to suggest that their actions are purely one-sided and based on their own initiative."¹⁹⁵

Bin Ladin was equally distrustful of the Iranian regime. The release of his family was fraught with hurdles and did not materialize "within a week," as `Atiyya was led to believe. A seemingly authentic letter authored by Bin Ladin's son Khalid addressed to Iranian Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamenei in January 2010 has been published. In it, Khalid made known to Khamenei that numerous letters requesting the release of members of his family were ignored by the Iranian government. It appears that the

Christopher Boucek, "Examining Saudi Arabia's 85 Most Wanted List," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 5 (2009). Iran has also "released" Mustafa Hamid (Abu Walid al-Misri), who is not believed to have been an al-Qa`ida member but historically an advisor and trainer for the group.

¹⁹¹ SOCOM-2012-0000012, 2.

¹⁹² Jane Perlez, "An Iranian Diplomat Is Abducted by Gunmen in Pakistan," *New York Times*, 13 November 2008.

¹⁹³ Alan Cowell, "Iranian Diplomat in Pakistan Is Freed," *New York Times*, 30 March 2010.

¹⁹⁴ Carlotta Gall, "Afghan Tells of Ordeal at the 'Center of Al Qaeda,'" *New York Times*, 2 March 2011.

¹⁹⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000012, 2.

escape of his sister Iman to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran forced the Iranian government to admit the presence of Bin Ladin's family in Iran. His brother, Sa`d, also "managed to escape by himself and he related to us the truths of what was happening, that they had repeatedly asked to leave Iran but they were beaten and suppressed."¹⁹⁶ Sa`d was reported to have been killed in 2009,¹⁹⁷ and in his last letter Bin Ladin indicated to `Atiyya that he was about to send him a copy of a letter Sa`d wrote before he died to be included in al-Sahab's archive "in view of the important information it reveals about the truth of the Iranian regime."¹⁹⁸

It appears that the Iranians promised to release Bin Ladin's family in exchange for the release of Atharzadeh, but they seem to have kept one of his daughters and her husband. In the second half of 2010, Bin Ladin asked `Atiyya to correspond with the Iranians (not clear if directly or indirectly) to tell them that "they promised that upon releasing their captive, they would release my family, which includes my daughter Fatima who [should naturally stay in the company of] her husband. It is not fair to separate women from their husbands; it is therefore necessary that they release her and her husband along with his [second wife] Umm Hafs."¹⁹⁹ Despite the many hurdles al-Qa`ida faced from the Iranian regime, the release of detainees in 2010 was timely. As noted earlier, Bin Ladin urged `Atiyya to move the "brothers" out of Waziristan, fearing for their security. He therefore saw the detainees released by Iran as a "lifeline" to compensate for those who were getting out or being killed. Not all the released detainees seem to have been known to al-Qa`ida, for Bin Ladin suggested that they should be given an intensive course not exceeding three weeks with a heavy emphasis on ideological instruction and some basic military training. He further remarked that this should serve as a testing course "through which we get to know their capabilities." Once the talents of the "brothers" were identified, they would be assigned appropriate tasks, such as sending them to their home countries to preach, recruit, raise money; others were to be kept in Waziristan to develop further their capabilities, and those who are disciplined could be sent to the frontlines to fight alongside the Taliban.²⁰⁰

Although the documents make it clear that the relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida is antagonistic, it is difficult to explain Iran's rationale for detaining en masse these jihadis for years, without due process. One plausible explanation that has been

¹⁹⁶ Khalid bin Ladin, "Min Khalid Bin Usama bin Ladin ila Murshid al-Thawra `Ali Khameni'i," <http://hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=162003> (accessed 23 April 2012).

¹⁹⁷ Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Officials Say a Son of bin Laden May Be Dead," *New York Times*, 24 July 2009.

¹⁹⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 10.

¹⁹⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 42-43.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 43.

advanced is that Iran held them “in part as a deterrent against a Qaeda attack on Iranian soil.”²⁰¹ Another widely reported explanation is that Iran was holding al-Qa`ida members “as a bargaining chip in its war of nerves with the US, and will only allow their extradition in return for substantial concessions.”²⁰² Whether Iran was aware of it or not, al-Qa`ida had plans to put the released detainees to “work.”

Pakistan

Unlike the explicit and relatively substantive references to the Iranian regime, the documents do not have such references about Pakistan. Although there are notes about “trusted Pakistani brothers,” there are no *explicit* references to any institutional Pakistani support. The one instance Pakistani intelligence is mentioned is not in a supporting role: in the course of giving detailed instructions about the passage his released family from Iran should take, Bin Ladin cautioned `Atiyya to be most careful about their movements lest they be followed. More precisely, he remarked that “if the [Pakistani] intelligence commander in the region is very alert, he would assume that they are heading to my location and he would monitor them until they reach their destination.”²⁰³ This reference does not suggest that Bin Ladin was on good terms with the Pakistani intelligence community. Another reference worth highlighting in this regard, is that Bin Ladin did not appear to enjoy freedom of movement with his family. In his long list of security measures to be followed by the “brothers” to evade the eyes of the authorities, he wrote to `Atiyya that it is most important not to allow children to leave the house except in emergency situations. For nine years prior to his death, Usama bin Ladin proudly told `Atiyya that he and his family adhered to such strict measures, precluding his children from playing outdoors without the supervision of an adult who could keep their voices down.²⁰⁴ Bin Ladin, it was said, could run but he could not hide. He seems to have done very little running and quite a lot of hiding.

Rather than outright protection or assistance from states such as Iran or Pakistan, Bin Ladin’s guidance suggests that the group’s leaders survived for as long as they did due to their own caution and operational security protocols.²⁰⁵ While the release of new documents may necessitate a reevaluation of al-Qa`ida’s relations to Iran and Pakistan, the documents for now make it clear that al-Qa`ida’s ties to Iran were the unpleasant byproduct of necessity, fueled by mutual distrust and antagonism. The limited discussion of the Pakistani military does not lend itself to any final determination on

²⁰¹ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Officials Say a Son of bin Laden May Be Dead.”

²⁰² Dan De Luce, “Iran Holding al-Qaida Men ‘as Bargaining Chip with US’,” *Guardian*, 7 August 2003.

²⁰³ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 41.

²⁰⁴ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 8.

²⁰⁵ See forthcoming article by Liam Collins to be published in the *CTC Sentinel*.

ties between Bin Ladin and the Pakistani state or actors within it, but Bin Ladin's emphasis on security precautions suggests that fear and suspicion dominated his calculations.

IV- Bin Ladin's Plans

Among the documents, Bin Ladin's last private letter is dated 25 April 2011. By then, events in the world, as he was observing them on his television screen, were unfolding at a pace that caused him to reassess his worldview. He saw the revolutions sweeping the Arab world to represent a "formidable event" (*hadath ha'il*), a turning point in the modern history of the *umma*. At the time he was writing, the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt, Zein al-'Abidin bin 'Ali and Husni Mubarak, had fallen. Bin Ladin was convinced that their fall was bound to trigger a domino effect, and "the fall of the remaining tyrants in the region was inevitable." Thus, "if we double our efforts towards guiding, educating and warning Muslim people from those [who might tempt them to settle for] half solutions, by carefully presenting [our] advice, then the next phase will [witness a victory] for Islam, if God so pleases."²⁰⁶

In line with al-Qa'ida's traditional stance, Bin Ladin dismissed the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) and similar Islamist groups, accusing them of being in pursuit of "half solutions" (*ansaf al-hulul*). This, in his parlance, means that although they raised the banner of Islam in their political discourse, they deviated from its teachings when they agreed to pursue their objectives through the electoral process. This is the spirit that underlies the statements made by al-Qa'ida's leaders when they accuse Islamists of compromising God's Law when they form political parties and contest elections that are regulated by positive law (*qawanin wad'iyya*). Nevertheless, Bin Ladin believed that, in recent years, some among the *Ikhwan* have been spreading the "correct understanding" of Islam, which caused him to anticipate that their return to "true Islam" (*al-islam al-haqq*) is merely a matter of time.²⁰⁷

Thus, within a week of his death, Bin Ladin envisaged two different strategies to be deployed in two geographical zones respectively. The first strategy pertains to the Arab

²⁰⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 1.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 2. Bin Ladin's cause for optimism that the *Ikhwan* may eventually return to "true Islam" is largely based on a long question that was addressed to "Abu Muhammad" (Ayman al-Zawahiri). Bin Ladin was most likely referring to al-Zawahiri's 2008 "al-Liqā' al-Maftuh," an online interview that was referred to in the press as the "Town Hall" meeting. It consists of two parts. The question that Bin Ladin was likely thinking about is the one posed by a certain "Sayf al-Islam" and it is in the second part. See "al-Liqā' al-Maftuh ma' al-Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri," *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad*, <http://www.tawhed.ws/r1?i=7534&x=1502092g> (accessed 2 April 2012).

region undergoing revolutions, and it entails “inciting people who have not yet revolted and exhort them to rebel against the rulers” (*khuruj ‘ala al-hukkam*); this, he believed, should be part of a broader media campaign that should be carefully orchestrated and void of any apparent differences among jihadis.²⁰⁸ The other strategy concerns Afghanistan, and it entails continuing to evoke the obligation of jihad there. In his mind, Muslims elsewhere regained their confidence and courage to revolt against their rulers thanks to the jihadis, who, by fighting against the United States in Afghanistan, dragged it into a war of attrition and weakened it. Following his logic, the jihadis’ bleeding of U.S. resources in Afghanistan lifted the “coercive pressure” that the United States exercised elsewhere; this, in turn, allowed people previously scared and overwhelmed by the United States to rebel against its “agents,” meaning their corrupt rulers.²⁰⁹

Notwithstanding the importance of jihad in Afghanistan, there was no doubt in Bin Ladin’s mind that the “greatest obligation” incumbent upon jihadis during this phase is to “guide and advise” (*tawjih wa-irshad*) the *umma*, which would involve the clarification of fundamental Islamic concepts (*mafahim islamiyya*). This task “ought to occupy the largest share of our efforts”;²¹⁰ more specifically, this entails “calling upon all those with literary capabilities, gifted with rhetorical eloquence be it prose or poetry to be delivered as audio, visual or in written [statements].”²¹¹ In his guidance to ‘Atiyya, Bin Ladin asked him to remind the “brothers” in the region undergoing revolutions to be patient and warn them against entering into conflicts with Islamic parties. These parties, he suspected, will likely form governments in these countries and “our obligation during this period is to focus on *da`wa* among Muslims and win supporters by spreading proper understanding [of Islam].”²¹²

‘Atiyya had some different plans with respect to countries undergoing revolutions. He thought that it would be a good idea to send some of the “competent brothers” to their home countries to take part in the events and liaise with Islamic forces. Bin Ladin was more cautious, urging careful consideration, especially as to whether a safe route may be arranged for them. As to those who are too eager to go, he advised ‘Atiyya that their decision should be respected as long as they take as much care as possible as to their safety.²¹³

²⁰⁸ SOCOM-2012-0000010, 3.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 2.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 3.

²¹² Ibid., 4.

²¹³ Ibid., 7.

Bin Ladin made an ambiguous but intriguing reference in relation to Saudi Arabia. It appears that the Arab Spring caused some in Saudi Arabia to worry as to whether Bin Ladin might call on Saudis to revolt. A certain “Sahib al-Tayyib” from Saudi Arabia sent a letter to ‘Atiyya to be shared with Bin Ladin, but its purpose is not explicit. Bin Ladin’s guess was that scholars who are either connected to the Saudi regime or who themselves believe in the importance of stability in the Saudi kingdom and the Gulf region warned al-Tayyib about the danger of stirring up (*ithara*) the situation in Saudi Arabia so that he may pass on this warning to “us.” Bin Ladin surmised that al-Tayyib was hinting too at the importance of stability in Saudi Arabia.²¹⁴ If he had a chance to call on people to revolt as he advised ‘Atiyya, it is unlikely that he would have spared the people of the Saudi kingdom from his statements.

Bin Ladin’s only public audio statement in response to the Arab Spring, released after his death, echoed some of the sentiments he expressed in his letter to ‘Atiyya. It is somewhat of a paradigm shift, as he did not designate the movers of the Arab Spring as *mujahidun*; instead, they are “free revolutionaries” (*thuwaar ahrar*) and they are engaged in a liberation (*tahrir*) enterprise. He viewed this as an event like no other event: “*hadath tarikhi ‘azim*” (a great historical event). “With the fall of the tyrant,” he proudly continued, “the meanings of submissiveness (*dhillat*), servility (*khunu‘*), fear and restraint (*ihjam*) have [also] fallen,” and the “meanings of freedom, dignity, courage and audacity (*iqdam*) have arisen.”²¹⁵

Within a week of his letter in response to the Arab Spring, Bin Ladin was killed. A month later, Ayman al-Zawahiri was announced as his successor. Al-Zawahiri is conspicuously distant from people in Bin Ladin’s immediate circle. One of the documents consists of an edited copy of al-Zawahiri’s fourth statement in response to events in Egypt; the edits are reflected in highlighted passages and bold fonts. It is not clear if Bin Ladin did the editing, but whoever did had solid grammatical foundations and preferred a self-effacing writing style. The edits were not included in al-Zawahiri’s final speech which was released in a video on 4 March 2011, on jihadi forums.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Ibid., 6. If Sahib al-Tayyib is one of the unrecognizable personalities in the 17 documents, he could be the “middleman” who sent a letter to ‘Atiyya in 2006, or the person who sent Bin Ladin the critical letter in 2006 – but unlikely; or very possibly the mysterious Abu Zifr/Zafr. It is interesting to note that in this instance, Bin Ladin slipped and used the term “al-mamlaka” (kingdom) instead of “Jazirat al-‘Arab.”

²¹⁵ Usama bin Ladin, “ila Ummati al-Muslima” (CTC Library).

²¹⁶ SOCOM-2012-0000013, 5. Of the 12 proposed corrections, only one appears in al-Zawahiri’s speech (“*muwalin*” - *tanwin bi al-kasr* instead of “*muwalun*” - *tanwin bi al-damma*). This is an obvious grammatical error and the type that any native speaker would automatically correct when reading. It cannot therefore

Beyond the presence of this statement by al-Zawahiri in the documents, Bin Ladin referred to him (as “Abu Muhammad”) in a number of places, but the references do not reflect that he was consulting him in the same manner he did with ‘Atiyya. If the documents are representative of Bin Ladin’s correspondence pattern and his immediate circle over the years, then ‘Atiyya must have been his closest associate. Of the 17 documents, eight can be ascertained to have either been authored by or addressed to ‘Atiyya. Not only does he seem to have acted as Bin Ladin’s conduit, but it is also possible that he exercised more control than he was authorized. In one of the letters, for example, Bin Ladin appeared frustrated that the audio or visual recordings he was sending to ‘Atiyya were either being delayed or not being released at all.²¹⁷

Will there be another “Bin Ladin”? If Bin Ladin’s instructions are closely followed, then the world might hear from Hamza bin Ladin, if he is still alive.²¹⁸ Bin Ladin intended for his son Hamza — who was released by the Iranians — to go to Qatar to pursue studies in religious sciences and preach to the *umma* the message of jihad. Unlike Arab rulers whom he abhors, Bin Ladin could not be accused of nepotism, and he certainly did not intend for his son to monopolize the right to preach jihadi discourse. Bin Ladin singled out Hamza not out of favoritism, but for “legal” convenience. Unlike many jihadi leaders — including some of Hamza’s brothers — who are on the run and whose public statements are therefore constrained by their limited movement,²¹⁹ Bin Ladin reasoned that his son Hamza might be able to spread the message as a free man. Hamza was imprisoned while he was still a child and it would be legally difficult to indict him of

be viewed as evidence that Bin Ladin’s edits, if they were his, ever reached al-Zawahiri. Given that the remaining grammatical errors were included in the speech, it suggests that this document with edits either did not reach al-Zawahiri in time or was never sent. For a version of the video, see:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWOu4Eb3pP4> (accessed 30 April 2012).

²¹⁷ SOCOM-2012-0000003, 3.

²¹⁸ There were conflicting reports on the status of Bin Ladin’s sons following the raid. Some have reported that Hamza possibly escaped. See Muna Khan, “Hamza Bin Laden, ‘Crown Prince of Terror,’ May Have ‘Escaped’ After US Raid in Pakistan,” *al-Arabiya*, 11 May 2011.

²¹⁹ Sa’d bin Ladin was likely the son most involved in al-Qa’ida, but he is believed to have been killed in a U.S. drone strike in winter 2009. See Joby Warrick, “One of Osama Bin Laden’s Sons Reported Dead After CIA Missile Strike,” *Washington Post*, 24 July 2009. The documents confirm his death. Another son, Khalid bin Ladin, was living with his father in the Abbottabad compound and was reportedly killed in the raid. See Muna Khan, “Hamza Bin Laden, ‘Crown Prince of Terror,’ May Have ‘Escaped’ After US Raid in Pakistan,” *al-Arabiya*.

any crimes.²²⁰ Hamza, Bin Ladin assured, “is of the jihadis; he shares their ideas and their sorrows.”²²¹

Conclusion

On the basis of the 17 declassified documents, Bin Ladin was not, as many thought, the puppet master pulling the strings that set in motion jihadi groups around the world. Far from being pleased with the actions of regional jihadi groups claiming affiliation with or acting in the name of al-Qa‘ida, Bin Ladin was burdened by what he saw as their incompetence. Their lack of political acumen to win public support along with their indiscriminate attacks resulting in the deaths of many Muslims is a subject that dominates Bin Ladin’s private letters composed in recent years.

The American public might be surprised to learn that Bin Ladin was unimpressed by the recent trend of American populist jihad. For example, he did not hold the American jihadi citizen Anwar al-‘Awlaqi (killed by a drone strike in Yemen in 2011) in great esteem; Bin Ladin was not even inspired by *Inspire*, AQAP’s English-language magazine designed to appeal to Muslim Americans to launch random attacks in the United States. He warned of its “dangerous consequences,” presumably due to its tasteless content and no doubt to the poor planning of the operations it promotes.²²²

In comparison to regional jihadi groups, Bin Ladin comes across as an outmoded jihadi. In contrast to their indiscriminate jihad, he was more interested in carefully planned operations. In view of the recent marketing of “lone wolf” operations as “New Age” jihad, Bin Ladin instead urged methodical planning of suicide operations. He asked ‘Atiyya to write to regional “brothers” warning them “not to send a single brother on a suicide *fida’iyya* operation (*‘amaliyya fida’iyya*); they should send at least two...we tested this (i.e., sending a single brother) in many operations and their percentage of success was low due to psychological factors that affect the [designated] brother in such a situation.”²²³ It is noteworthy that Bin Ladin used a secular political expression to describe suicide operations rather than the common religious expression “martyrdom operation” (*‘amaliyya istishhadiyya*) typical of jihadi discourse. The regional groups’ eagerness to declare “Islamic states” in their regions was moderated by Bin Ladin urging patience to first secure public support; while they aim to win the small short-term battles, his eyes were on a larger prize: defeating the United States to undo what

²²⁰ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 44.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² SOCOM-2012-0000015, 9.

²²³ SOCOM-2012-0000019, 35.

he believed to be “apostate” Muslim regimes and liberate his fellow Muslims. Bin Laden knew well how to articulate publicly the grievances that he believed Muslims suffer at the hands of their regimes and Western countries. His private letters show that saving his fellow Muslims from the indiscriminate attacks of his jihadi “brothers” weighed even more heavily on his mind.

Appendix

This appendix attempts to explain how some of the letters related to others, and in one instance it provides alternative interpretations of a specific letter. Additionally, the appendix includes the author, the recipient and the date of each letter. The conversion from the Hijri to the Gregorian calendar is inaccurate in some of the letters. If there is no summary after the basic information, then the letter does not appear to be directly related to another. This appendix is not meant to summarize each letter; for a brief summary of each of the 17 documents, see the summaries accompanying the documents.

SOCOM-2012-0000003

From: no name listed (assessed to be Usama bin Ladin)

To: Shaykh Mahmud

Date: Thursday, 17 Ramadan, 1431 (26 August 2010)

SOCOM-2012-0000004

From: no name listed (assessed to be Adam Gadahn)

To: unknown

Date: post-January 2011

The letter does not explicitly state who is the author or to whom it is addressed. Since the author remarked that the American television channel ABC broadcast a part of a statement he gave on the fourth anniversary of 9/11, this suggests that it was authored by Adam Gadahn who did indeed release a statement then, part of which was broadcast on ABC. The letter is unlikely to have been addressed to Usama bin Ladin since the author referred to him in the third person. It is also not dated, but it must have been authored either in January 2011 or soon thereafter since he referred to the resignation of Octavia Nasr from CNN in July 2010 (he erroneously stated MSNBC) and that of Keith Olbermann from MSNBC on 21 January 2011. The letter is in essence a response to many of the requests/queries that Bin Ladin made in his letter to 'Atiyya dated October 2010 (SOCOM-2012-0000015), particularly those concerning a media strategy for the ten-year anniversary of 9/11. It is possible that 'Atiyya shared SOCOM-2012-0000015 with Gadahn and this letter by Gadahn addressed questions raised in SOCOM-2012-0000015.

SOCOM-2012-0000005

From: Usama bin Ladin

To: Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr

Date: Friday, 26 Sha'ban, 1431 (6 August 2010)

SOCOM-2012-0000006

From: unknown

To: Azmarai

Date: 6 Muharram [1432] (c. 11/12 December 2010)

The letter is addressed to “the honorable brother Azmarai,” not Zamarai — the other name Bin Ladin used as his signature. The only other instance Azmarai is used in the documents is not by Bin Ladin, but by ‘Atiyya in his 2009 letter to Bin Ladin (SOCOM-2012-0000012). It should be noted that Bin Ladin is normally addressed as “shaykh,” not as “brother” as the author of this letter addressed Azmarai. Below are two different interpretations of this letter.

First Interpretation

The letter may have been addressed to Zamarai/Bin Ladin, and Azmarai is simply a typo. Since it referred to the “brothers in Somalia,” urging reconsideration of Bin Ladin’s decision not to declare publicly a union with them, it can safely be dated as having been composed post Bin Ladin’s letter to Abu al-Zubayr dated August 2010 (SOCOM-2012-0000005). Therefore the Hijri date of 6 Muharram should be in 1432, which would make it c. 11/12 December 2010.

This letter suggested that Bin Ladin’s position with respect to rejecting formal mergers with regional jihadi groups was subject to internal criticism. Instead of seeing it as a sign of “God’s grace” and a testament to al-Qa’ida’s growth, Bin Ladin was virtually accused of “being burdened by this expansive body.”

Who might this author be? As noted in this report, the only regional jihadi group that Bin Ladin publicly admitted into the fold is al-Qa’ida in Mesopotamia (AQI) back in December 2004. All other groups that were publicly admitted were announced by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who recently admitted al-Shabab into the fold in February 2012. Was the author al-Zawahiri? It is difficult to assert, but given his disposition towards expanding al-Qa’ida through mergers, it is possible that it was him. If so, al-Zawahiri did not share Bin Ladin’s strategic vision with respect to al-Qa’ida’s relations with the affiliates; moreover, unless Bin Ladin changed his mind about al-Shabab, then the February decision to admit the group in the fold would not have been blessed by Bin Ladin if he was still alive. Following the same logic, one also has to wonder whether al-Zawahiri acted on behalf of Bin Ladin or against his directives when he publicly admitted other groups into al-Qa’ida. If al-Zawahiri was doing so against Bin Ladin’s directives, then Bin Ladin did not have a firm grip on al-Qa’ida itself, let alone its so-called affiliates. Given that the documents show that Bin Ladin would not publicly

denounce groups like AQI/ISI, al-Zawahiri might have assumed that Bin Ladin would not publicly refute him.

Second Interpretation

The letter may not have been addressed to Bin Ladin and “Azmarai” is not a typo but perhaps a code indicating that it was not addressed to Bin Ladin, but about Bin Ladin. Several reasons could justify this alternative reading.

- As noted earlier, Bin Ladin is addressed as “shaykh,” not as “brother,” as this letter does.
- The author was cryptic, referring to the “letter of our friend” (*risalat sahibina*), before switching from the singular when he referred to this “friend” to the plural when he referred to the “brothers” even though the two are meant to refer to the same person or group. The first reference to “brothers” cannot be to the “brothers in Somalia” since the first “brothers” referred to those who were fearful of al-Qa`ida’s growth; Bin Ladin’s letter to Abu al-Zubayr showed that al-Shabab was seeking union with al-Qa`ida. Thus, the “brothers” cannot be seeking this union and at the same time fearing it.
- The author of this letter was explicitly critical of the pursuit of “construction and development,” which Bin Ladin explicitly outlined in his letter to Abu al-Zubayr. Emphasis on “construction and development” is atypical al-Qa`ida discourse, and his own letters show that Bin Ladin was starting to emphasize it at least for Somalia. Yet the author referred to those who wished to pursue this path of “construction and development” in the third person plural. If he was addressing Bin Ladin directly, why did he not use the second person singular or plural? More than likely, the switch from singular to plural and from third person to second person plural was to make the message all the more cryptic.
- The reference to those satisfied with people seeking them but not wanting to go beyond that may well be a remark about Bin Ladin, who was reluctant to admit groups in al-Qa`ida’s fold as the letter to Abu al-Zubayr suggests. The reference urging “you” (in the plural) “to reconsider your decision” is a reference to the recipient who could in turn exert influence on Bin Ladin to change his mind.
- Finally, this is the only letter whose author requested that its recipient destroy it after reading it. If it was addressed to Bin Ladin, why would the author be concerned?

If this letter served as a criticism of Bin Ladin behind his back, it is still possible that Ayman al-Zawahiri authored it for the same reasons indicated above. But one might justifiably ask why it should be in his electronic files? One possible explanation is that its recipient decided to share it with Bin Ladin in view of its seriousness and/or out of

loyalty. Alternatively, it may have been on the thumb drive of an operative, perhaps `Atiyya, who deleted it (as the author explicitly requested) and used the same thumb drive to deliver different letters to Bin Ladin.

SOCOM-2012-0000007

From: Mahmud al-Hasan ('Atiyyatullah) and Abu Yahya al-Libi

To: Hakimullah Mehsud

Date: 27 Dhu al-Hijja (3 December 2010)

SOCOM-2012-0000008

From: Jaysh al-Islam in Gaza

To: `Atiyya/Shaykh Mahmud

Forwarded to: `Abd al-Hamid (and later forwarded to Usama bin Ladin)

Date: Shawwal 1427 (October-November 2006)

SOCOM-2012-0000009

From: unknown

To: unknown

Date: unknown

SOCOM-2012-0000010

From: Abu `Abdallah (Usama bin Ladin)

To: Shaykh Mahmud/`Atiyya

Date: Monday, 22 Jumadi al-Awwal 1432 (25 April 2011)

SOCOM-2012-0000011

From: unknown (likely of Egyptian origin)

To: `Adnan (Hafiz Sultan)

Date: 9 Rabi` al-Awwal (28 March 2007)

SOCOM-2012-0000012

From: `Atiyya

To: Honorable Shaykh (assessed to be Usama bin Ladin or another senior leader)

Date: Thursday, 11 June 2009

SOCOM-2012-0000013

From: unknown

To: unknown

Date: unknown

Publicly available document – a public statement by Ayman al-Zawahiri

SOCOM-2012-0000014

From: unknown (intermediary between `Atiyya and Saudi religious scholars)
To: `Atiyya
Forwarded to: Usama bin Ladin
Date: Early 2007

SOCOM-2012-0000015

From: Zamarai (Usama bin Ladin)
To: Shaykh Mahmud
Date: Wednesday, 13 Dhu al-Qidah, 1431 (20 October 2010)

SOCOM-2012-0000016

From: no name listed (assessed to be either Usama bin Ladin and/or `Atiyya)
To: Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi)
Date: assessed to be post October 2010 (see notes below)

SOCOM-2012-0000017

From: no name listed (assessed to be Usama bin Ladin)
To: unknown
Date: unknown

It may be helpful to approach the above three documents in terms of their possible relations to one another in the context of the following: SOCOM-2012-0000015, authored by Bin Ladin, noted on page five that he was enclosing a file consisting of parts of a letter that he would like `Atiyya to edit for the purpose of sending to Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi), the leader of AQAP. He indicated that `Atiyya is better placed than him to draft it because he knows the “brothers” there (in Yemen). He also asked him to share the final format of the letter. SOCOM-2012-0000017 consists of many paragraphs and notes that do not form an internally coherent essay/letter. Some of these are identical to paragraphs included in the letter to Abu Basir (SOCOM-2012-0000013). It is therefore possible that SOCOM-2012-0000017 was the draft that Bin Ladin enclosed to `Atiyya; in turn, `Atiyya used parts of SOCOM-2012-0000017 and transformed them into a coherent letter to Abu Basir, and this coherent letter is SOCOM-2012-0000016 – which is not signed – to share with Bin Ladin before sending. It is not clear whether Bin Ladin wanted `Atiyya to sign it in his or Bin Ladin’s name.

SOCOM-2012-0000018

From: unknown based in Riyadh
To: Honorable Shaykh (assessed to be Usama bin Ladin)
Date: 08/20/1427 (c. 12-14 September 2006)

SOCOM-2012-0000019

From: no name listed (assessed to be Usama bin Ladin)
To: Shaykh Mahmud
Date: unknown

The content of the letter makes it evident that it is authored by Bin Ladin. The letter is not dated, but its author refers to a report, "Nisa' al-Qa'ida," on al-Arabiya, dated 4 July 2010. The letter then had to have been composed post 4 July 2010 but before 20 October 2010 because parts of SOCOM-2012-0000015 (dated 20 October 2010) follow up on issues raised in SOCOM-2012-0000019.